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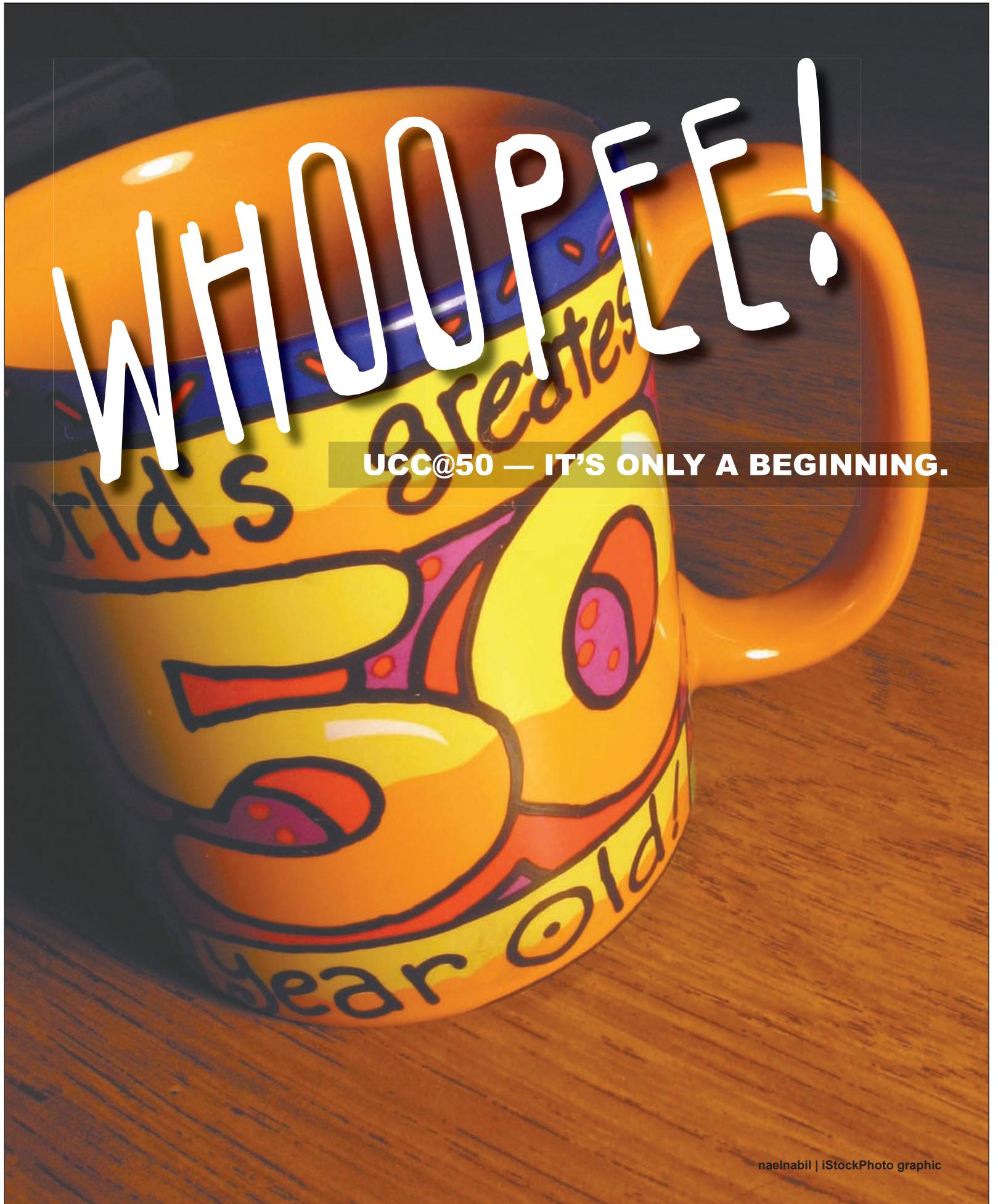
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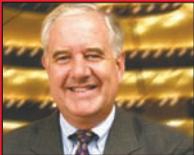
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Global church reacts to Filipino assassinations.



naelnabil | iStockPhoto graphic

FROM THE COLLEGIUM



John H. Thomas

'Church was where the big things of life were addressed'

When the question is asked at new member classes — “How many of you grew up in the United Church of Christ or one of its predecessor denominations?” — the number of raised hands typically represents far less than half in the room.

As I convene meetings of the UCC's Collegium of Officers, I am joined by a former Presbyterian, a former Roman Catholic, a former Baptist and a former member of our partner church in the Philippines.

When the Collegium arrives in Hartford to celebrate the denomination's 50th, I'll be the only one of us to have been around since the beginning! Our denominational diversity has profoundly enriched our life. But I'm also grateful for the privilege of being shaped early in life within the faith of this church.

I was almost 7 when the Uniting General Synod was held in Cleveland. The event didn't have much impact on me then, but it wasn't long before I began to hear debates at church over whether to join this new denomination. Fortunately, enthusiasm for Christian unity overcame the resistance of those who harbored New Englander fears about the much caricatured “Herr Pastor” of the German side of the merger!

By the time the UCC was 10 years old I'd been to my first ordination, and it was a woman! Long before I knew about Antoinette Brown I knew our associate pastor, the Rev. Pat Bennolt, and understood that God calls women as well as men.

I was a regular at church camp at UCC-related Silver Lake Conference Center in Connecticut, as well as the annual Bushnell Rally where several hundred Pilgrim Fellowship youth would meet near the Hartford Civic Center for youth “revivals.” In my local church and at Silver Lake, we'd been hearing about the Civil Rights Movement, not just in the South, but in Stamford, Conn., where debates over joining a fair-housing effort made congregational meetings tense.

Clearly, church was where the big things of life were addressed.

By the time the UCC was 15, I'd watched the church step into the heated conflict over the war in Vietnam in ways that forced me to balance personal conviction with strained relationships among the members of my own church. I'd discerned a call to ministry with the help of wonderful pastors and lay leaders, and was beginning studies at Yale where the Congregationalist faces on the refectory wall gazed down on an amazing array of theological students from varied traditions and around the world.

A church deeply committed to the ecumenical vocation. A church nurturing its youth toward lay and ordained ministries. An inclusive church honoring the leadership of women and men. A church prepared to withstand conflict in order to address the great public issues of the day.

These are some of the memories I will carry with me to Hartford. And while they're not the experiences of all, or even of many any more, I cherish them, and give thanks for them. They are the memories that help me “let it shine!”

The Rev. John H. Thomas, who spent his childhood at *First Congregational UCC in Stamford, Conn.*, grew up to become the UCC's general minister and president. He is a member of the UCC's five-person Collegium of Officers.

I'M GRATEFUL FOR the privilege of being shaped early in life within the faith of this church.”

AMAZING ARCHIVES

At its April board meeting, the UCC's Local Church Ministries granted funds to the UCC-related Amistad Research Center at Tulane University in New Orleans to hire additional professional help to sort through tons of historic documents and other items related to the UCC's former American Missionary Association and United Church Board for Homeland Ministries.

“We got a very nice proposal a full-time archivist and graduate assistant to catalogue 472 linear feet of materials,” said the Rev. Holly MillerShank, vice chair of LCM's budget committee.

Founded by the AMA in 1966, the Amistad Research Center is a repository for the study of ethnic history, culture and race relations in the United States. It is the nation's oldest, largest and most prestigious independent archives of original documents that chronicle the history of African Americans and other ethnic minorities, including Native American, Appalachian and Jewish peoples.

The Center holds over 700 collections, including more than 10 million original or one-of-a-kind manuscripts dating from 1780 to the present.

In the mid-19th century, the AMA grew out of the defense committee formed for the illegally enslaved Africans aboard the ship *La Amistad*. The AMA subsequently founded schools for freed slaves, including several existing UCC-related colleges — Dillard, Fisk, Huston-Tillotson, LeMoyné-Owen, Taladega, and Tougaloo.

The Amistad Research Center receives ongoing financial support from LCM's Daniel Hand Endowment Fund. Representatives of LCM and the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries also sit on the Center's board of directors.

Look for the Amistad Research Center's booth at General Synod 26 in Hartford or learn more online at tulane.edu/~amistad.

UCC GETTING GREENER

“Caring for Earth: A Conference on Environmental Spirituality and Activism” will be held as a pre-Synod event on Thursday, June 21, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at **Immanuel Congregational UCC** (opposite the Mark Twain House) in **Hartford, Conn.**

Presented by the UCC National Environment and Energy Task Force, the one-day event will include presentations and workshops by Jerome Ringo, board chair of the National Wildlife Federation; Beverly Wright, founding director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at UCC-related Dillard University; Robert D. Bullard, distinguished professor at Clark Atlanta University and director of its Environmental Justice Resource Center; and Charles Lee, director of the EPA's Environmental Justice Office and author of the UCC's historic “Toxic Wastes and Race Report” (1987).

Registration is \$25 and can be mailed in c/o **Cedar Hills UCC**, 11695 SW Park Way, **Portland, OR 97225**. More information is available by contacting office@chucc.org or 503/644-3838.

BON VOYAGE, LA AMISTAD

Just as thousands will be arriving at General Synod 26 in Hartford, Conn., the Freedom Schooner Amistad will hoist its sails at Long Wharf



UNITED CHURCH NEWS



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SHORTHAND



in nearby New Haven and embark on a historic first-time voyage across the Atlantic where it will visit Sierra Leone, the west Africa land once home to the former Amistad captives.

The ship will carry the story of Sengbe Pieh and his fellow captives, and how they changed the course of U.S. history in their struggle for freedom and against slavery. The Amistad will carry the slogan, “Confronting the Past; Transforming the Present,” encapsulating the heart of the Amistad America project.

The Amistad event was the first human rights trial in U.S. history and, in many ways, heralded the birth of the UCC's justice-advocacy tradition.

On Thursday, June 21, at 2:30 p.m., early Synod visitors can participate in a public *bon voyage* as well wishers gather from across Connecticut and the United States to bless the Amistad Freedom Schooner and its crew as they embark on this 14-month adventure.

Learn more at amistadamerica.org.

COALITION GATHERING

The 2007 National Gathering of the UCC Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns will be held June 19-21 in Hartford, Conn., just prior to General Synod 26.

Learn more and register at ucccoalition.org

LACE UP!

Billed as the “Tick-Tock Walk,” sponsored walkers and runners will take to the streets of downtown Hartford, Conn., to underscore the mantra of the UCC's Evangelism Ministry: “Now is the time for new church development!” In the process, they'll raise awareness and dollars for the UCC's New and Renewing Church Fund.

Join preaching pedestrians of all ages and skill levels at 11 a.m. on Sat., June 23, at the arch at Bushnell Park. Registration costs \$30 and includes a t-shirt.

Information and registration forms are available at ucc.org/newchurch.

SECOND PRINTING

After selling out of its first run of 15,000 copies, the UCC's commemorative anniversary book, “UCC@50: Our History, Our Future” is back in business with a second printing of 10,000 more.

“Due to the popular demand across the church, we sold out quickly,” says Barb Powell, the UCC's director for production. “But now the second printing is ready and available for a ‘song.’”

Priced to sell, the full-color 98-page books are only \$6.95 each; 10-24 copies are \$6.45 each; and 25 or more cost \$5.95 each.

Orders of 50 or more come with a free copy of the commemorative DVD, “UCC@50: Yesterday's Visionaries, Today's Voices,” which also is available for single purchase for \$19.95.

“We've heard reports of how the book is being used by church schools and new-member classes,” Powell says. “And the DVD is a terrific introduction to the UCC — entertaining yet informative.”

Order from United Church of Christ Resources at 800/537-3394.

BEST SELLERS

The UCC's Pilgrim Press, the oldest continuous publisher of books in North America, announced its bestsellers list, as part of The Christian Century's “spring books” edition published May 1. Here's a look at Pilgrim's most-read books this year:

1. “Solomon's Success: Four Essential Keys to Leadership” by Kenneth L. Samuel
2. “Blessed by the Presence of God: Liturgies for Occasional Services” by F. Russell Mitman
3. “Weddings with Today's Families in Mind: A Handbook for Pastors” by Doreen M. McFarlane
4. “I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church” by Paul Nixon
5. “Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America” by Marvin A. McMickle

These and other titles are available for purchase through The Pilgrim Press's online bookstore at thepilgrimpress.com or by calling 800/537-3394.

LESS WORDY, MORE USER-FRIENDLY APPROACH TAKEN

UCC's national website to debut new look in early June

By J. Bennett Guess

The UCC's national website <ucc.org> is getting a face lift — and a tummy tuck, dermabrasion and dye-job to boot.

The site's online "extreme makeover," the culmination of 18 months of behind-the-scenes discussions, diplomatic maneuvers and test designs, will debut on or near Tuesday, June 5.

The exact launch could vary up to 48 hours for some viewers, because it can take that long for a new site to replicate fully across the internet, says Daniel Hazard, the UCC's web manager.

The new version of the website will introduce a less-wordy, more visitor-friendly homepage — a challenging task for a site that's long relied on multiple links, wordy paragraphs and competing content from its primary landing page.

The new look incorporates a lot more breathing room, says Michelle May, one of the site's principal designers and a member of the UCC's web team.

The makeover also more fully embraces the branding of the denomination's Stillspeaking marketing campaign, including its color schemes, a more-youthful appearance and less-churchy language.

"We chose more whimsical navigational categories to appeal to less-institutional users," says May, explaining that denominational insiders tend to prefer agency-like headings but most website users want more straight-forward terminology.

In addition, many categories will be cross-referenced, in anticipation that users may take different paths to reach the same destination.

"We want to make it as easy as possible for people to find what they're looking for," Hazard says.

For the first few weeks after the site launches, a two-minute video tutorial from "The UCC Answer Guy" — starring Hans Holznagel, the UCC's minister for community life — will be available on the homepage to help users become familiar with the new look and functions.

To simplify navigation, mouse-over drop-down menus will allow for more-broad categories with various sub-categories. For example, "The 411" will be an all-encompassing information link that takes you to UCC basic information, beliefs, history, etc. "Church Stuff" is full of resources that pastors or lay leaders will use, but visitors may want to skip over. "Buy it" offers several e-commerce choices, such as The Pilgrim Press or United Church of Christ Resources.

"The Apple [corporate] website actually was our initial inspiration, because it focused on a simpler look and better organization with-

out overwhelming the user," says Hazard. "That's definitely the trend in web design."

The web team explains that, instead of the homepage housing lots of boxy content in side-by-side columns, the homepage will become a church vestibule of sorts, a place

Chase, the UCC's director of communications.

"No longer can organizations simply create attractive websites and sit back and hope that people will flock to them," Chase says. "We knew we needed to take better advantage of 'push' technology to

ONCE LOST, NOW FOUND

Starting June 5, when the UCC's newly-designed website is launched, all of the UCC's national websites will be integrated into a single 'search' function. For the first time ever, searches conducted on one UCC website will offer suggested links to items housed on our various national sites. Here's a rundown of the UCC's "family" of URLs, which until now, barely spoke to one another:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| <ucc.org> | <askthequestion.org> |
| <stillspeaking.com> | <globalministries.org> |
| <uccvitality.org> | <accessibleairwaves.org> |
| <i.ucc.org> | <news.ucc.org> |
| <ucctakeaction.org> | <thepilgrimpress.com> |
| <ourfaithourvote.org> | <unitedchurchpress.com> |

that helps introduce the user to the "look and feel" of the church. UCC art director Randy Varcho consulted with the web team throughout the redesign process.

The site's visual masthead will incorporate a flash presentation of the UCC's historic "firsts" to help familiarize newcomers with the UCC's longstanding work for justice and peace. A few static images, which will change regularly, will help promote newer resources and time-sensitive information. A scrolling news ticker will keep viewers up-to-date on the most-pressing headlines.

Content management

An important part of the redesign will not be visible by most, but is significant. A new content management system will allow for multiple editors and writers in various ministries to post information and resources as they become available.

"For example, we'll be able to respond to disasters more quickly because the disaster-response staff will be able to make content changes directly on their own," Hazard says. "They won't have to find Dan or Michelle whenever an emergency happens and hope that we're sitting by a computer."

This means department pages will become more dynamic throughout <ucc.org>. The homepage will no longer be the sole place where the most important information resides, Hazard explains. There will be various centers of ever-changing content, depending on what the user is looking for.

Cross-referenced databases will enable contributors to a hurricane-relief effort, for example, to be sent information about work-camp opportunities down the road.

The changes are part of an overall shift in the way the UCC's national setting thinks about its "electronic protocols," says the Rev. Robert

drive information to users. From the beginning, that's been the underlying emphasis that's held this massive undertaking together."

Since the UCC maintains at least 12 distinctive websites, and all of the sites' documents must be reformatted and moved to the UCC's new web hosting company — Get Active / Convio — it will take several months before the web transfer is fully complete. However, the most widely-used documents will be available when the new website launches this month, says Hazard.

"This is a very labor-intensive project," says Chase, "and our web team should be given lots of praise for their careful attention to detail, while continuing to maintain all the functionality of our current sites."

Other notable changes:

- Once personal information is entered, future web forms will be pre-populated with your data. No need to start from scratch each time.
- The homepage and all interior pages will include prominent links to popular features, such as find-a-church, search, contribute, e-mail-to-a-friend, and the ability to sign up for e-mail updates on various topics.
- Find-a-church data will include streets maps as well as satellite-image mapping. (This also means you can view your church from Mars.)
- Interior pages will include links to related stories by topic, as well as links to the most-recent items posted in that section. News headlines will appear on every page.
- Users can adjust the size of text for better viewing.
- Online-giving capabilities will be improved by reducing the number of steps it will take to offer your contribution.
- More-sophisticated statistical tools will allow the UCC's web team to do better analysis of how the site is being utilized.



New and renewing churches granted endowment boost

By J. Bennett Guess

As a sign of its support for new and renewing churches, the UCC's Local Church Ministries has transferred \$3,675,000 from previously unrestricted reserves to support its board-designated New and Renewing Churches Endowment Fund.

The action by LCM's board of directors came during its April board meeting in Cleveland and increases the endowment fund's principal from \$325,000 to \$4 million.

Income earned on the endowment is now restricted for the purpose of supporting grants, programs and resources for new and renewing churches, according to the board action.

The decision does not mean that additional grant dollars will be made available immediately to new and renewing churches, but the action does signify a long-term fiduciary commitment by LCM to earmark a portion of its unrestricted dollars for this endowed purpose.

The Rev. David Schoen, who leads the UCC's evangelism ministry in Cleveland, was ecstatic about the decision, especially since his request to the LCM's budget committee was for \$2 million less than the budget committee and full board eventually set aside.

"I've never wept for a good reason at a budget meeting," Schoen said. "To see the enthusiasm and encouragement of a financial budget committee, I wish we had taped it. They approached this

decision, throughout, by staying focused on the mission of the church."

Schoen said it's his hope that LCM soon will develop training events for renewing churches in much the same way that it provides similar resources for new-church pastors.

"We want to stay focused on new churches, but in a year to two years, I would hope that we would have the same program for redevelopers," Schoen said.

Schoen also hopes LCM's action will leverage individual contributions to support new and renewing efforts. Within the past two years, \$129,794 has been given or pledged to the New Church Challenge Fund from more than 330 donors.

At General Synod 26 in Hartford, Conn., a "Tick-Tock Walk" will be held on Sat., June 23, when sponsored walkers will raise awareness and funds for new church development. Information and registration forms are available at <ucc.org/newchurch>.

Schoen said the credit for LCM's commitment to new and renewing churches rests with the Rev. José A. Malayang, LCM's executive minister who is retiring in November.

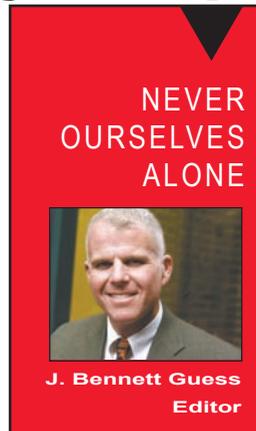
"Joe is the greatest advocate for this," Schoen said, "and as he is culminating his ministry, this is something that he has been particularly passionate about."

LEARN MORE@

<ucc.org/newchurch>

'LOOKING THROUGH THE LENS OF UCC HISTORY'

A 'heady, exasperating mix'? — Don't forget 'beautiful,' 'hopeful,' too



MANY PEOPLE HAVE SHORTENED POWELL'S SENTIMENTS, leaving our 'exasperating headiness' intact, but leaving out the beauty and optimism of which he also wrote."

A heady, exasperating mix." Perhaps no other descriptive phrase in the UCC's 50-year history has been used as often, or as accurately, to describe us.

It comes from a widely-read, widely-celebrated article written by the late Rev. Oliver G. Powell in the September 1975 issue of A.D. Magazine, a predecessor publication of United Church News.

Powell, who then served as the Boston area minister of the Massachusetts Conference, wrote that piece just as I was starting fourth grade at East Heights Elementary in Henderson, Ky., where I could barely spell "heady" and couldn't even pronounce "exasperating." And I knew nothing of this "United Church" that would later become such an important part of my life.

But, at the time when Powell was busy synthesizing the characteristics of our church, this green denomination — then just 18 years old — was at the height of its eager, awkward, pimply teen-aged years. No longer able to rest on the hype of its ecumenical birth in 1957, the UCC was now living the adventurous life of a risk-taking college freshman.

Organizational theorists might have well advised this still-new church to stay close to home and mind its own fledgling institutional concerns, but the UCC's "heady, exasperating" membership — and leadership — would have none of that. They had more important issues with which to contend than mere ecclesiastical order.

They were busy being the church in the world: joining protests, resisting mili-

tarism, confronting racism, supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, standing alongside migrant farm workers — and talking about sex long before other Christians knew it existed.

"There is something about the essential spirit of the United Church that resists and resents being pinned down in cold, logical prose," Powell wrote then. "Actually, poetry and singing serve it better, for at its heart, there is something wild and unpredictable, even reckless."

For the vocabulary-challenged, "heady" actually means "clever" or "shrewd," even "wildly impetuous." It's a right-on descriptor for a church that's been plotting social change ever since the Pilgrims signed the Mayflower Compact of 1620. Likewise, "exasperating" is characterized by "impatience" and "intensity" — both common traits among most justice activists I know. For anyone who has ever witnessed the stimulating debates and debaters that comprise a UCC General Synod, you must agree that "heady" and "exasperating" work quite well.

But upon re-reading Powell's original article, I couldn't help but notice that his original descriptors of the UCC had fallen victim, in recent years, to an unknown editor's red pen. Many people of late, unfortunately, have shortened Powell's sentiments, leaving our "exasperating headiness" intact, but leaving out the beauty and optimism of which he also wrote.

Here's what Powell actually authored in 1975: "What a *beautiful*, heady, exasper-

ating, *hopeful* mix!" (The word "beautiful" even made it into the article's headline.)

In describing us, Powell not only detailed our headier traits, but brought life to our fun-loving ones as well. Not surprisingly, he lifted up images of sauerbraten and potatoes, long draughts of dark beer, romantic poetry and Bach chorales. He talked of New England boiled dinners and baked beans, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and skylight filtering through clear, freshly-washed, church-window panes.

In the mid-70s, when the 'malaise' index was soaring alongside out-of-control gas prices, Powell stopped to note the UCC's more-faithful hue. A people of "risky adventure," he called us.

Perhaps, at 50, like never before in our history has there been a greater need for the UCC to rediscover its beauty, its hopefulness. In so doing, I doubt we will ever jeopardize the exasperating headiness we also cherish. But it could temper it a bit — perhaps calling us to be a little more forgiving and a lot less suspicious of one another.

"Come to the party!" is how the invitation to the UCC's 50th anniversary was first issued one year ago. Now, the RSVPs have been counted, and the largest UCC contingent ever to assemble will gather this month in New England to celebrate the occasion.

Together in Hartford and via the internet, maybe this is our best moment to declare: "The UCC: What a beautiful, hopeful mix!"



Powell



LETTERS

'Faithful, Christian service'

How thankful we are for the faithful, dynamic ministry of the Rev. José A. Malayang [executive minister of UCC's Local Church Ministries], whose testimony to his calling as an ordained Christian minister appeared in the February-March issue of United Church News. Then, in the April-May issue, appeared the announcement that Joe would retire the end of this year. He will certainly be missed!

In the 1970s it was my privilege to be among the members of Michigan Conference who welcomed Joe to serve as minister of a rural parish north of Detroit. I was then serving as the Conference's East Area Minister. It was always a great joy for my wife, Jane, and me to visit Joe's church and later have dinner with his gracious family.

We wish to commend Joe and his wife, Bennie, for many years of faithful, Christian service in local churches and the wider ministries of our United Church of Christ. Thanks be to God!

The Rev. William Daniels
Lancaster, Pa.

Engage the Bible

Thank you for publishing the biblical reflections by the Rev. Thomas I. Warren [spirituality page]. His insights are helpful, relevant, and badly needed.

I feel strongly that the UCC can and

must lead a renewal of Bible study in mainline Protestant churches. As we continue to watch right wing interpreters dominate the conversation about religion in public life — offering either an exclusively personal salvation theology or a destructive rapture theology — voices from mainline Protestantism are silent. Part of this is due to the media's lack of attention to mainline religious leaders, and part is due to the laity's lack of engagement with the Bible outside of worship.

A side effect of this is that our communities can suffer a loss of perspective and hope when we lose our ability to interpret and discuss current events through a biblical lens. The regular study and discussion of the Bible can be a joyful and transformative experience — revelatory even — not to mention enabling us to maintain strength in the struggle for justice and peace in the world.

Tom Liddle
Peace UCC
Duluth, Minn.

Save our UCC camps

I was raised at Dover Congregational UCC in Westlake, Ohio, and attended church camps when I was growing up.

Recently, I was on a women's retreat at Templd Hills [an outdoor ministry of the UCC's Ohio Conference]. The gentleman overseeing and maintaining the camp men-

tioned that if every UCC member donated just \$5 that it would pay off the debt that our camps are in.

I am having my children go to both UCC camps [in Ohio] this summer and I want them to experience the fun, enjoyment and Christian fellowship that I did. I don't want to see the camps in decline or have us lose them after all these years.

Is it possible to start a campaign for this type of donation?

Beth Squires
Dublin (Ohio) Community UCC

'If we trust and obey'

Thanks for your encouragement in "Lord, create in my life and my church a miracle," the editorial from the Feb./March edition.

I think like you that, though things look so bleak sometimes, if we trust and obey God then why would He not send us miracles, even the greatest miracle of all — eternal salvation.

Miracles are hard for us to accept and comprehend. I guess that's why we call them miracles.

Joyce L. Rohrbach
Jamestown, Mo.

SEND LETTERS of fewer than 150 words to United Church News, 700 Prospect Ave., Cleveland, OH 44115; e-mail <guessb@ucc.org>. Letters may be edited for brevity and clarity.

THE PORPOISE-DRIVEN CHURCH

Zoo becomes funeral setting for 'one wild and precious life'



COMMENTARY



Julie Ruth Harley

It began with a phone call. "The name is Shafer. My wife died last Friday. I'm calling to see if you could conduct a memorial service."

I wasn't familiar with the name, but it turned out that Mrs. Shafer had never joined our church, but had been active in one of our choirs many years ago. She had requested that one of our ministers officiate at her service.

"One thing you need to know," Mr. Shafer said, "is that the service will be held at Brookfield Zoo. My

But on the day of the memorial service, Mr. Shafer informed me of a change in venue. "We're expecting more people than we originally anticipated, so we had to move to the Dolphin Underwater Viewing Area."

I panicked. I had no dolphin stories! But the service was set to begin soon. Ready or not, I headed for Brookfield.

At the service, as guests admired the dolphins gliding past several 15-foot-high windows behind me, I simply stood behind a podium that proclaimed, "Brookfield Zoo welcomes you."

AS THE SERVICE UNFOLDED, I began to wonder if our church architects might consider putting an aquarium in the chancel."

With these joyful, elegant creatures swimming behind me, I shared my sermon, which included a line from Mary Oliver's poem, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" And I read from Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say rejoice."

Later, as family members and friends shared their memories, I also turned my gaze to the dolphins. While most swam by with little interest in our odd ritual, a few hesitated by the window, looking at us.

It seemed the dolphins even smiled and kissed the glass as a neighbor shared her memory of a chinchilla that her children shared with the Shafer family — two weeks at one home, two weeks at the other.

A former colleague told of the time they started a professional library at the mental health center, where Mrs. Shafer contributed a book called "How They Do It," detailing how various animal species, uh, multiply.

As the service unfolded, I began to wonder if our church architects might consider putting an aquarium in the chancel.

A guest said after the service, "Did you realize that while you were praying the dolphins were standing straight up in the water?" When I pray, I hold my arms out horizontally. Did the dolphins follow my command because I looked like one of their trainers? Or were they joining us in seeking comfort and mercy from our Creator?

In that moment — as it seemed that all creation, even the dolphins, were lining up to pray with us — I felt fully alive. And I was reminded of one of Joseph Campbell's stories: "We don't have ideology. We don't have theology," says a Japanese priest. "We dance."

That day I discovered a ministry that goes beyond words — in a porpoise-driven church.

The Rev. Julie Ruth Harley is minister for membership and discipleship at Union Church (UCC) of Hinsdale, Ill.

wife was a docent there for years, and she loved the place."

As Mr. Shafer's voice faltered with pain, my mind raced to envision where exactly in the zoo this could take place. Biblical allusions sprang to mind. In the lion's den? Where the wolf and the lamb lie down together? In the *tohu wabohu* of the Living Sea?

"The service will be in Habitat Africa," he continued, somewhat tentative now, afraid I would back out of the plan. "There is a conference room that overlooks the rhinos and giraffes. We'll have an open bar and appetizers after the service."

An open bar? I guess we could dispense with finger sandwiches in the fellowship hall and live without suburban matrons stationed regally at our silver tea set. But, reaching for something familiar, I asked, "What about music? Will there be music?"

"No, since the animals will be so close by, I don't think we can have music."

That's when I began to imagine monkeys swinging from tree to tree, stopping occasionally to pick bugs out of my hair.

No sanctuary. No music. "Well, do you want this to be a religious service?" I asked, unsure I could talk for an hour about death without referring to Jesus.

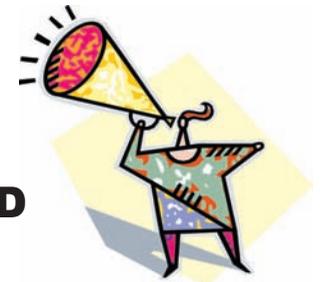
"That's a hard question to answer," he said, relaying how his wife's faith was challenged as an 11-year-old child when her father died. "My wife certainly couldn't recite the Apostle's Creed with integrity, but she was a spiritual person."

That clinched it for me. If this woman went through a crisis of faith as a child, who was I to deny her the rites of the church in her family's hour of grief?

Though I still had my doubts, I told Mr. Shafer, "I'll be glad to lead the service."

In preparation for the service, I learned that Mrs. Shafer held masters degrees in social work and anthropology. Her home was filled with African masks, Buddhist Temple doors and Navajo sand paintings, as well as stacks of "National Geographic" and "Smithsonian" magazines. Her favorite book was Joseph Campbell's "The Power of Myth."

In keeping, I looked up some stories about African animals and found Joseph Campbell excerpts to incorporate into the UCC's "Service of Thanksgiving for One Who Has Died."



OVERHEARD

“The question facing Pilgrim Church is a question facing all churches and indeed all faith communities.”

— The Rev. Madison Shockley, pastor of Pilgrim UCC in Carlsbad, Calif., where members overwhelmingly adopted a safe-church policy on May 6 that includes a detailed security policy, background checks for people working with children and procedures for integrating sex offenders into the congregation. The welcoming congregation was faced with big decisions when a convicted sex offender said he wanted to attend worship. The story received prominent attention from network television and major newspapers. (San Diego Union Tribune)

“There's already the kind of interest that one has when network news anchors change.”

— The Rev. James Hudnut-Beumler, dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, speaking about the selection of a new senior minister for the famed Riverside Church (UCC/ABC) in New York City. The Rev. James A. Forbes' retirement is June 1. (The New York Times)



TABULATIONS

This month, United Church News marks the two-year anniversary of the launch of its online news portal at <news.ucc.org>. Here's a look at the stories that have interested you the most:

- ▶ **36,082 READERS**
'General Synod overwhelmingly calls for full marriage equality' —Published July 4, 2005
- ▶ **12,212 READERS**
'Virginia church burned, vandalized following General Synod actions' —Published July 9, 2005
- ▶ **12,191 READERS**
'UCC members sign declaration opposing same-gender marriage equality' —July 14, 2005
- ▶ **11,511 READERS**
'Since newsworthy General Synod, UCC reports both positive, negative fallout' —Published January 19, 2006
- ▶ **10,579 READERS**
'UCC member Sen. Barack Obama discusses faith and politics' —Published June 29, 2006
- ▶ **10,422 READERS**
'Lutheran leader calls for an ecumenical council to address growing biblical fundamentalism' —Published Aug. 11, 2005
- ▶ **9,732 READERS**
'UCC leader criticizes Family Research Council's use of Foley scandal to scapegoat gays, lesbians' —Published Oct. 5, 2006

Stay informed with ever-changing UCC news headlines at <news.ucc.org>.

SHARE YOUR MOST MEMORABLE GENERAL SYNOD MOMENT

SOAPBOX



At General Synod 26 in Hartford, Conn., United Church News will publish five daily news digests. As space allows, we'd like to tell others about your favorite General Synod memories over the past 50 years.

Was there a particular moment that touched you? A particular vote that encouraged you? A particular person or preacher who inspired you?

Remember, if you're brief and concise (no more than 75 words), you're much more likely to find yourself in print. If you're too wordy, our editors will tire of your autobiography and move on to the next submission.

At this point, only emailed responses are being received at <newsroom@ucc.org>. Send before Thursday, June 21, and be sure to put "Soapbox" in the subject line. Also, don't forget to give us your name, the name of your local church, and your city and state.

"Soapbox" is a periodic compilation of reader responses to specific topics or questions. As always, United Church News reserves the right to edit your submissions for brevity and clarity.

Email responses only to:

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New UCC report shows racism still tied to environmental injustice

By Sandy Sorensen
For United Church News

Environmental injustice in minority communities is as much or more prevalent today than 20 years ago, according to a follow-up study to the landmark “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States” report that put the environmental justice movement on the map two decades ago.

The new UCC-commissioned study, “Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty, 1987-2007” was released

publicly on Earth Day, April 22, and commemorates the 20th anniversary of the UCC’s ground-breaking report on environmental racism.

An executive summary of the new 180-plus page report was unveiled at a March 22 press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

“[The new report] again reflects a clear racial pattern where waste sites are located and the way the government responds or does not respond to contamination emergencies in people of color communities,” said the Rev. Carlos J. Correa, the UCC’s minister

for environmental justice.

The findings show that two decades later, disproportionately large numbers of people of color still live in hazardous waste host communities, and that people of color are not equally protected by environmental laws.

“People of color across the United States have learned the hard way that waiting for government agencies to respond to toxic contamination can be hazardous to their health and the health of their communities,” said Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center

People of color across the United States have learned the hard way that waiting for government agencies to respond to toxic contamination can be hazardous to their health.”

— Robert Bullard, environmental investigator

at Clark Atlanta University. Bullard was the principal investigator for the study.

The new report points to the dismal post-Katrina response in New Orleans as one example of unequal treatment of minorities in hazardous waste emergencies. The findings also show that environmental laws don’t protect

minority communities any more than they did 20 years ago when the report was originally commissioned.

The report is the first national study to use a new method of data analysis that better locates people in relation to hazardous waste sites, and uses 2000 census data to show that the racial disparities are much greater than previously reported. It includes two detailed case studies, one on post-Katrina New Orleans and the other on toxic contamination in an African American community in Dickson, Tenn.

Read the study online at <ucc.org/justice>.



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UCC takes on Rupert Murdoch's New York media empire

The UCC filed a petition on May 1 with the Federal Communications Commission asking it to deny license renewals for two Fox-owned TV stations in New York because the stations' owner, Rupert Murdoch, also owns The New York Post.

The FCC's cross-ownership rule expressly prohibits newspapers and TV stations from being owned by the same entity.

The UCC's Office of Communication, Inc. — known as "OC, Inc." — and the RainbowPUSH Coalition are asking the FCC to rescind temporary waivers granted to Fox "and to deny renewal outright" to WWOR-TV and WNYW-TV.

"If the FCC rescinds Fox's waiver, as UCC and RainbowPUSH Coali-

tion seek, renewal of the licenses for WWOR-TV and WNYW would violate the plain language of the newspaper-broadcast cross-ownership rule and the applications would be defective," reads the filing's summary.

Cheryl Leanza, an attorney who is managing director for the UCC's OC, Inc., says the FCC should enforce existing rules meant to counter excessive media consolidation.

"The increasing concentration of media ownership is an issue that affects many local communities," Leanza says. "Whoever owns and controls local media outlets controls which issues and stories get covered in the news and, moreover, controls how those stories get told."

The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., founder and president of Rainbow-

PUSH, says, "If the FCC grants the renewals for the two Fox-owned TV stations in New York, they will continue the tradition of 'all day, all night, all white,' which clearly does not represent the diversity of American culture."

"With most of our TV and radio stations controlled by giant corporate conglomerates, now less than 10 percent of TV and radio stations are owned by minorities or women," Jackson says. "We all deserve the right to share our point of view. We are asking the FCC to deny the license renewals for the two Fox-owned TV stations in New York."

The UCC's petition includes declarations from a variety of UCC members and pastors from New York and New Jersey who say they are harmed by increasing centralization of news-gathering operations.

All day, all night, all white' clearly does not represent the diversity of American culture."

— The Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr.

The Rev. Sherry M. Taylor, the UCC's Central Atlantic Conference's Association Minister in New Jersey, is one of the petitioners.

"Fox's common ownership of The New York Post, WNYW-TV and WWOR-TV harms me by sharply reducing the number of independent voices available to me," Taylor writes. "Unless the licenses are denied, my right to access diverse programming will continue to be harmed."

Says Leanza, "The fewer independent media owners there are, the less diversity of information and viewpoints

available to local communities."

The UCC has long advocated for persons historically excluded from the media, especially women, children and people of color. In a 1964 landmark case against WLBT-TV in Jackson, Miss., the UCC helped to establish the legal precedent that television stations, because of operating on public-owned airwaves, must serve the needs of their communities of license.

Earlier this year, a UCC-filed license challenge against Univision resulted in a record-setting FCC fine of \$24 million against the Spanish-language network for its failure to comply with children's educational programming guidelines.



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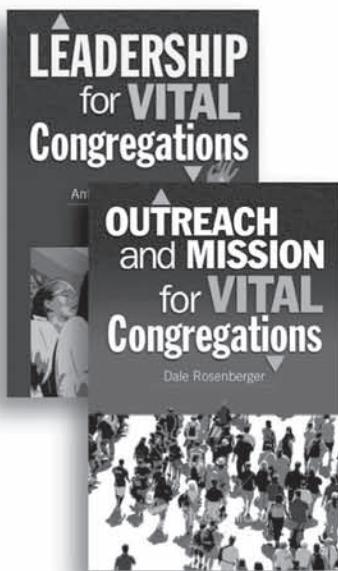
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JOHN THOMAS' TWIN FINDS FAITH RENEWED AT REINVIGORATED CHURCH

In Montclair, N.J., vital UCC churches 'cooperate rather than compete'

By Joanne Griffith Domingue

Dick Thomas and his wife, Anne Garty, did not have a spiritual community for most of their adult life. When they found one, they jumped in with both feet. Less than two years ago, they joined **First Congregational Church UCC in Montclair, N. J.**, and already Dick, 56, is moderator and Anne, 55, is a church officer. Recently Dick took a day off from work to build stage sets for a play the church is putting on. And Anne is sewing, repairing and ironing costumes. Their minister, the Rev. Scott Howell, is thrilled. "I would love to clone them," Howell said. "They are a wonderful example of the new energy that is coming into the church."

But perhaps no one is happier than the Rev. John Thomas, the UCC's general minister and president. Dick Thomas and John Thomas are identical twins.

"It is very exciting to see Dick and Anne caught up in the renewal there," John said, "to see them catch fire with enthusiasm."

And they have.

'Jesus left the building'

But recently, on April 29, you wouldn't have found Dick or Anne in church, nor anyone else. The church entrance was locked with a huge red and black banner declaring: "Jesus has left the building and we followed."

Anne and Dick, along with the other 75 or 80 Sunday worshippers, were out in the community volunteering. "This is not an alternative to worship, but worship in action," Howell said.

Whenever a fifth Sunday falls in a single month, they set that day aside to participate in hands-on service.

Parishioners sign up from a list of volunteer options the week before and put their intention in the offering plate. At the end of worship people process out, lock the door, sing the final hymn and unfurl the banner.

Even visitors are active in the program, Howell said. "They love the concept of doing hands-on service."

Anne chops carrots for God's Love We Deliver, an organization that provides 3,000 meals daily to people who are sick or shut-in. Dick helps with services at nearby senior housing, where he provides transportation to one of the clients.

"You get a real sense that church is a lot more than an hour on Sunday sitting in a pew," Dick said.

Howell believes the fifth-Sunday worship delivers a powerful message. "Imagine if all UCC churches in the area — or around the U.S. — did this. Imagine the influx of service. It's living out our values."

Alive with renewal

For First Congregational UCC, 2000 was a watershed year. They had about 35 people worshipping in a "massive plant" facility. Should

they close their doors?

People said no. "There's an ember here. Keep it going. Fan it and it might ignite," Howell said.

And it did. Howell came in 2003. The church decided their future was to provide an alternative Christian message, to create a welcoming church for those who might not already have a church.

And Dick was impressed with all that was happening at the church. "This was a good match," he said. "We could contribute there."

Anne grew up Catholic, but had left the church in recent years over theological differences. "That's probably why we didn't do anything sooner," she said. "... And it was the right time in our lives... We

This was a good match. We could contribute there."

— Dick Thomas, moderator of First Congregational UCC, a renewing church in Montclair, N.J.

Utilizing resources from the UCC's "God is Still Speaking" campaign, weekly worship has grown from 35 to an average of 80 to 100. From just three or four children in the church school, there are now about 20.

Howell provides "gifted Sunday leadership," John Thomas said. "There is a lot of creativity in the church. They are clearly having fun."

Howell credits his hometown church, **First Congregational UCC in Memphis, Tenn.**, for his inspiration. He was ordained there and served as an associate under the dynamic leadership of the Rev. Cheryl Cornish, senior minister.

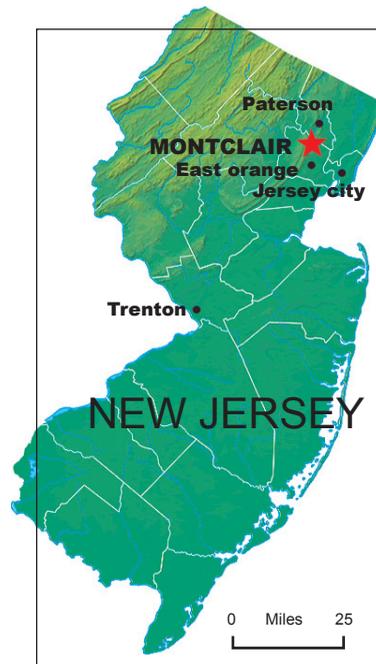
Working with Cornish was "an incredible teaching experience," said Howell, who also worked for a few years at the UCC's national offices in Cleveland between his time in Memphis and Montclair.

'We could contribute'

A spark ignited for Dick and Anne on Easter a few years ago. They were visiting Anne's sister and attended church at **St. John's UCC in Lansdale, Pa.** Anne said Dick really enjoyed it. It reminded him of how much he had liked church as a youth, growing up at **First Congregational UCC in Stamford, Conn.**

They went to church the next Sunday in Montclair and joined a few months later. "We didn't church shop," Anne said.

The downtown church is similar to the one Dick grew up in. Dick and Anne knew the congregation was struggling to survive and that appealed to them. "Their leadership was needed," John said.



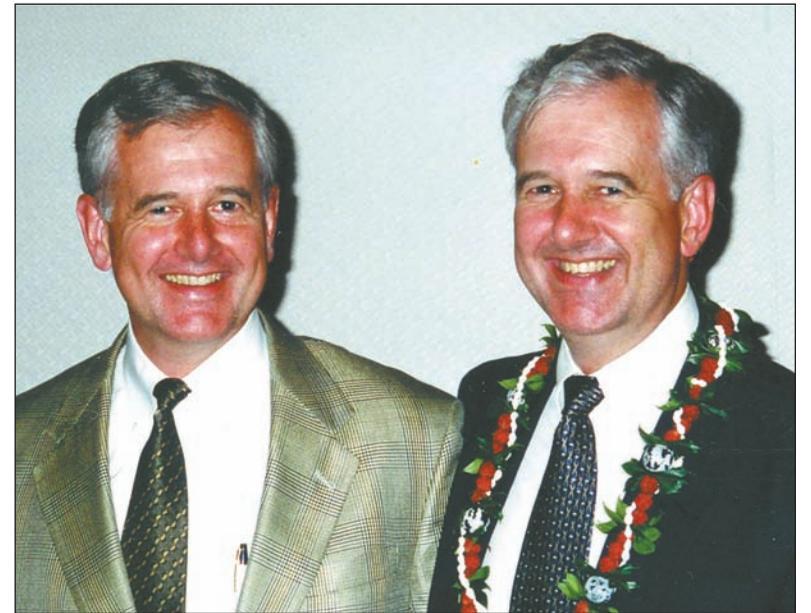
wanted to be a little more involved in our community."

UCC-rich Montclair

Montclair is a community rich with vital, thriving churches like **Union Congregational UCC in Montclair** and **Glen Ridge Congregational UCC** just down the road.

Union UCC supports a strong outreach program. "We're trying to put our money where our lives are," said the Rev. Stephanie Weiner, senior minister.

High school students are flying to Peru on a mission trip, while the confirmation class just returned from a service weekend in Washington, D.C. Adults, who have already traveled for service in New Orleans, are already busy planning another mission trip. The church nursery school established a relationship with a nursery school in



Dick Thomas (l.) has gotten excited about church again, after not attending for many years. His identical twin, the Rev. John H. Thomas (r.), is the UCC's general minister and president. Both posed together at Celebration 2000 when John Thomas was installed as GMP.

New Orleans and held a 1/2-K run around the church property. "They get it," Weiner said of the children. "They know what they are doing."

At Glen Ridge UCC, the Rev. David Stinson, senior minister, talks about how people need a menu of ways to develop faith.

The church's four children's choirs, for example, are a vital part of the congregation's outreach. The church supports a strong education program for all ages, and church school attendance has almost tripled in 15 years, he said.

Stinson offers a rich program for new members, including classes and mentors. He started two groups for men of varying ages. "I was stunned with how much the men got out of the group... They tell me over and over there is no where else to talk about marriage, children, what we believe or don't believe."

The UCC churches in the area "cooperate rather than compete," Weiner said. "The better one does, the better the other does. I feel good about the collegial relationship."

Thomas Twins

Dick and John Thomas's mother, Margaret Thomas, 92, is a 79-year member of the First Congregational UCC in Stamford, Conn. "Both boys did church from the day they were born," Margaret said.

Both were active in the youth group: John was president, Dick was treasurer, she said.

Their youth leader, the Rev. Raymond Shoup, now retired, said, "I pretty well knew from the beginning I was dealing with a special set of boys." Shoup served the church as its youth leader and later as its senior minister from 1962-70.

After high school, Dick and John chose different colleges. "They were often in the same

class together [in high school] and had had enough of that," Margaret said.

Said Dick, "You get tired of telling people who you are. People would refer to 'the twin,' not to John or Dick."

Dick went to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, while John attended Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. That first college semester apart was hard. "I was very glad to see John at Thanksgiving," Dick said.

Dick followed his father into chemistry. After Bates, he earned a doctorate in chemistry from the University of Illinois. Meanwhile, John went to Yale Divinity School and became a minister.

As boys, "they were so much alike," Margaret said. "They still are as grown men. People see one and think it's the other."

Last fall, when Dick and Anne were on vacation in Camden, Maine, someone yelled from across the street, "Hey John!" It was the Rev. Don Overlock, retired Penn Northeast Conference Minister.

Sometimes the shoe is on the other foot. Dick, a chemist with Ciba, a specialty chemical company, travels often. "Occasionally my colleagues run into John at airports and think it's me," Dick said.

"And we both married librarians," Dick said. "But that was pure chance."

While Dick was not going to church, John was pretty much hands off, Dick said. "But he's happy I'm going again."

Said John, "It's fun to be sharing leadership issues in the church with Dick, to have a shared vision."

Joanne Griffith Domingue, a freelance journalist and United Church News contributor, is a member of First Congregational UCC



SYNOD PROVIDES 'A SENSE OF THE WHOLE OF THE CHURCH'

UCC's 26th General Synod is Edith Guffey's seventh as administrator

By J. Bennett Guess

In 1985, when 31-year-old Edith Guffey was packing for a trip to Ames, Iowa, to attend her first-ever UCC General Synod, little did she know how that experience would soon alter her life.

A young administrator at the University of Kansas and a member of **Plymouth Congregational UCC in Lawrence, Kan.**, Guffey acknowledges she was elected that year as a Synod delegate because, "I was a young adult, a layperson, a woman, an African-American, and was active in the [Kansas-Oklahoma] Conference."

The diversity which she helped bring to General Synod 15 was — and continues to be — one of the biennial gathering's most-meaningful trademarks, she says, and "being intentional about diversity" was something that spoke volumes to her during her first involvement with the national UCC of any kind.

"I really had no sense of the diversity or 'bigness' of the UCC," she recalls. "I was, frankly, blown away. That Synod gave me a sense of the whole of the church, something that no local church can replicate. It's just not possible."

She remembers waiting at midnight, along with others, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., one of the Synod's principal speakers, arriving on the Iowa State University campus. She recalls watching Valerie Russell, the legendary justice advocate and UCC leader, maneuvering among Synod goers, seemingly knowing every person there. She remembers "Balaam's Courier" — the perennial, unauthorized, truth-telling tabloid at General Synod — printing the names of church executives who stayed at nearby hotels rather than campus dormitories.

"People still refer to [Ames, Iowa] as the Mecca of all Synods," she says.

Remembered as the first and only General Synod to be held on the campus of a major public university, the 1985 gathering also proved to be groundbreaking in terms of its decisions: Both the Just-Peace Resolution and the Open-and-Affirming Resolution were adopted that year, leaving lasting designs on the denomination's DNA.

"I remember being assigned to a committee that I didn't have the slightest bit of interest in," she says, "but I did what I was supposed to do and found myself engaged in the process."

Her 1985 experience in Ames led to a second trip to Synod two years later, this time in Cleveland, where delegates heard a proposal to relocate the UCC's national offices from New York to St. Louis, an idea that was overwhelmingly rejected.

The St. Louis proposal's rejection, however, led to the formation of a second "location committee," on which Guffey was asked to serve. And her participation in the relocation process, and her articulate advocacy for Cleveland as the eventual site, led several to urge her to run for UCC Secretary, then one of three elected-officer positions in the denomination.

"People asked me to apply — and I was having more fun at my church

work than I was in my real work — so I began to think, 'Maybe this is something that I can do,'" she says. "I wouldn't have used the word 'call' back then, but I got a call in 1991 to serve as secretary of the church."

Although, at the time, she worried how her husband, Jerry, and their two boys — then ages 3 and 9 — would adjust to her frequent travels as a national church officer, she decided to go for it.

And that's how Guffey's transition from Synod-goer to Synod-organizer got its start.

No two Synods alike

New to her national secretary post in 1993, when the UCC and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) held their first-ever combined Synod/Assembly in St. Louis, she'd wait to have her first crack at the helm of Synod administration two years later, when she organized General Synod 20 in Oakland, Calif. (1995). And, since then, it's been followed by command performances in Columbus, Ohio (1997) and Providence, R.I. (1999).

After national restructure in 2000, when Guffey was elected Associate General Minister, she continued as Synod administrator in Kansas City (2001), Minneapolis (2003), Atlanta (2005) and this year, in Hartford, Conn.

Over the years, she's learned what to worry about — and what doesn't matter as much.

"Once you've seen one hotel you've seen them all. That's not what matters most," she says. "But what I love is how every General Synod starts out as one thing and evolves into something else. Each has a life of its own, and my role is just to make sure we can pull it off."

For example, when the site selection committee first chose Hartford back in 2001 to host General Synod 26, it really didn't grasp how large the 50th anniversary celebration might become.

"And it really has evolved into something greater than we had ever imagined at the time," she says. "The 50th Anniversary Committee said it wanted a General Synod like we've never had before, and we're going to get it."

As United Church News talked



UCC Associate General Minister Edith Guffey in her office.

Randy Varcho | United Church News photos

The 50th Anniversary Committee said it wanted a General Synod like we've never had before, and we're going to get it."

— Edith Guffey

with Guffey in early May, she was stewing over organization of the Synod's "community groups" process. Yet, her most pressing worry — at that moment anyway — was making sure the shuttle service would be up to the task, given that 6,200 people had already registered as of May 8, ensuring that General Synod 26 would be the largest in the denomination's 50 years.

"No matter the Synod, you have to worry about the shuttles," she says, speaking from her Synod-planning expertise. "But this is the first time we've ever run this extensive of a shuttle system."

The Rev. Davida Foy Crabtree, Connecticut Conference Minister, says Guffey has natural abilities when it comes to planning large, multi-faceted gatherings — especially how to juggle its many diverse components, from its competing agenda items to its hospitality issues, from its up-front visuals to its behind-the-scenes details.

"Watching her deal with this exponentially larger Synod and all it implies has been quite an experience," Crabtree says. "She gives clear leadership and establishes good understandings of who is responsible for what, but somehow she manages to flex as needed and still maintain that clarity."

And, for many repeat Synod goers, Guffey has become its most-familiar face.

"Her enthusiasm for the General Synod, its importance in our life together and the people and experiences

who comprise it is absolutely contagious," Crabtree says.

Synod's city-wide campus

This year's "Synod in the City" on Saturday, June 23 — with multiple venues and performances throughout downtown Hartford — offers new opportunities and challenges for Synod planners.

"The planning committee began to think outside the box, 'What if we thought about the city as our campus [for General Synod]'" she remembers.

The result is an amazing line-up of speakers, preachers and performers who will take to stages and classrooms across downtown Hartford — even while clowns, jugglers and musicians mix it up with Synod attendees at Bushnell Park and its surrounding streets.

One of the greatest challenges for General Synod 26 has been its enormous size and scope, coupled with a late-in-the-game decision to relocate to the Hartford Civic Center from the newer Connecticut Convention Center, due to a still-unresolved dispute between management and a labor union.

"They were not able to come to terms, and the General Synod has been very clear over the years about a worker's right to organize," she says. "So the Executive Council made the decision, and since the issue still has not been resolved, it turned out to be a good decision."

Guffey acknowledges that the church's justice stance will mean a little less comfort for Synod goers, who will be challenged to make "personal accommodations" because of the decision.

"If I were looking for a place to go, I'd never choose the [Hartford] Civic Center," she acknowledges. "It's been a long time since we've been in an arena like this."

Of particular concern to Guffey is the challenges that people with disabilities might face. Although the facility is accessible, it's an older venue and therefore less navigable, she says.

"It's going to be a challenge to people, especially since we're expecting more than twice the number of people we've ever had before," she says. "But we have a history of standing with low-wage workers, so how could we not do this?"

In hindsight, the move could have unforeseen positives: The Convention Center holds only about 6,000 in its main hall, while the Civic Center — the city's arena — accommodates 12,000. The additional plenary space may be a bonus, with registration already soaring above what the Convention Center could have handled.

Her advice for the masses? "Look for volunteers in the bright blue shirts to help you," she says. (Why not red shirts? "Because everyone else will be wearing red!")

"And take a deep breath," she advises. "Nothing there is life and death. Just go with the mindset of 'have a good time.'"

LEARN MORE

<ucc.org/synod> or <ucc.org/50>

Despite Synod's celebratory tone, a few business items await delegates

Like it or not, no General Synod would feel complete without a few spirited debates over proposed resolutions.

The same is true in Hartford, where General Synod delegates will make that sometimes-awkward attempt to “speak to, not for” the whole of the church. However, the final word — as always — will come from the UCC's 5,600 local congregations which will then receive, study, react — and perhaps overreact — to the Synod's decisions.

Despite the celebratory tone of this year's 50th Anniversary bash, 12 proposed resolutions have been introduced. Each has been reviewed by the Committee of Reference and recommended by the UCC's 90-member Executive Council for consideration by delegates in Hartford.

Like always, the range of topics is broad.

Two proposals, submitted separately by the Indiana-Kentucky Conference's Western and Eastern Associations, explicitly call for the Synod to rescind its controversial 2005 decision to affirm support for same-gender marriage equality.

Two items address U.S. policy in relationship to immigration and border control, while another calls for legalization of physician aid in dying.

One proposes significant changes in General Synod composition, while another asks for more support for the denomination's small, rural churches.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, the UCC's general minister and president, tells United Church News that this year's proposals — while

fewer in number than in years past — still “reflect a balance between concern for overcoming alienation within the life of the church and commitment to overcoming injustice in the larger society.”

[PROPOSALS] REFLECT A BALANCE between concern for overcoming alienation within the life of the church and commitment to overcoming injustice in the larger society.”

— The Rev. John H. Thomas

There is a complementary desire, he says, in all of the proposed resolutions “to seek the health and wholeness of the church as well as the health and wholeness of the human community.”

Given the near-equal number of items that speak to the church as well as speak to the wider world, Thomas says that balance is a fitting tribute to a church that 50 years ago claimed Jesus' prayer as its motto: “that they may all be one that the world may believe.”

“If diversity within covenant is one common theme among many of the resolutions,” Thomas says, “the dignity and integrity of human persons is the common theme among those resolutions that address public concerns.”

Thomas thinks it is unlikely that this year's resolutions will have the same degree of public impact as those approved two years ago in Atlanta, where same-gender marriage equality and the issues related to the Middle East attracted significant media attention.

“Nevertheless, the issues posed by the resolutions being proposed are important and reflect enduring themes,” he says. “How can we balance conviction and communion, the need to speak a clear word on challenging moral issues while at the same time tending to the fragile relationships of churches and members within our common life?”

UCC-member Obama to speak at General Synod

U.S. Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.), an active UCC member since 1988, has accepted an invitation to speak to his fellow UCC members gathered in Hartford, Conn.

Obama — a member of **Trinity UCC in Chicago**, the denomination's largest congregation — will speak to delegates and visitors at 2:30 p.m. at the Hartford Civic Center during the day-long “Synod in the City” lineup.

Obama joins an impressive schedule of prominent presenters during the five-day General Synod, including journalist Bill Moyers, activist Marian Wright Edelman, preacher Peter Gomes, actress Lynn Redgrave, author Marilynne Robinson and more.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, general minister and president, said Obama will further strengthen the draw to the 50th anniversary gathering.

“Sen. Obama is one of the most exciting figures on the political landscape today,” Thomas told United Church News. “More than that, he is a public figure who takes seriously the relationship between faith and public life. We look forward to being challenged by one of our membership about how to make a difference in the world.”

Obama has spoken often about his profession of faith, his membership in the socially progressive UCC and the need for Democrats to take seriously the concerns of religious Americans.

He became familiar with Trinity UCC during his days as a Chicago community organizer in the mid-1980s, an experience he wrote about in the August-September 2006 issue of United Church News.

“You come to church — in the first place — precisely because you are of this world, not apart from it,” Obama wrote. “You need to embrace Christ precisely because you have sins to wash away, because you are human and need an ally in this difficult journey. It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity UCC on 95th Street in the Southside of Chicago one day and affirm my Christian faith.”

In 2004, just after being elected to the U.S. Senate, Obama told United Church News, “Trinity UCC has been a true community to me — a place in which the mind, heart and soul come together to celebrate God's goodness.”

As of May 8, more than 6,200 had registered for General Synod,



Obama

which guarantees it will be denomination's largest national gathering in its 50-year history.

With a few weeks still remaining, it's being rumored that as many as 10,000 might attend, especially since the celebration gathering is being held in New England, where the UCC is the largest Protestant church.

Billed as a high-point of this summer's biennial national gathering, “Synod in the City” will be a day-long series of celebratory events held in multiple venues throughout downtown Hartford where an array of speakers, artists and performers will help take Synod out of its traditional convention-hall setting and into the streets of the city. “The world comes to Hartford ... courtesy of the UCC” is how the event is being billed locally.

CONCERNS GS26 DELEGATES WILL ADDRESS INCLUDE:

- ▶ **“A CALL TO END MIGRANT DEATHS AND THE U.S. BLOCKADE STRATEGY OF BORDER ENFORCEMENT.”**
Submitted by the Central Atlantic Conference.
Calls for end to current border tactics by U.S. government, asks for greater legalized opportunities for migrants and challenges current global economic system that fuels massive migration.
- ▶ **“AGAINST DEPLETED URANIUM WEAPONS.”**
Submitted by the Illinois Conference.
Calls for public discussion about the impact of use of depleted uranium weapons and public acknowledgment by the U.S. government that such weapons are being used in war.
- ▶ **“A REAFFIRMATION OF MARRIAGE BASED ON THE WORD OF GOD.”**
Submitted by the Indiana-Kentucky Conference's Western Association.
Calls upon Synod to reaffirm the definition of marriage “to be exclusively between one man and one woman.”
- ▶ **“A REAFFIRMATION OF THE HISTORIC AND ECUMENICAL CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON MARRIAGE.”**
Submitted by the Indiana-Kentucky Conference's Eastern Association.
Calls upon Synod to reaffirm “the historical, ecumenical Christian position that God ordained marriage to be between one man and one woman,” but recognizes that many of the legal benefits of marriage “can and should be addressed [to same-gender couples] through the legislative process without changing the basic definition of marriage.” Seeks Holy Spirit's guidance and calls for end to “vitriol or personal attack” when discussing this issue.
- ▶ **“CALL FOR A MORE-HUMANE U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY.”**
Submitted by the Illinois Conference.
Calls upon the church to study reasons for human migration and to respond more humanely to the economic circumstances of the poor.
- ▶ **“CHANGING THE COMPOSITION OF GENERAL SYNOD.”**
Submitted by the Ohio Conference's Central Southeast Association.
Calls for each church to have a delegate, provided the church has contributed a minimum of \$1 per member to Our Church's Wider Mission during the past two years. Churches above 400 members would get an additional delegate per each 400. Also, all authorized ministers would be voting delegates. Covenanted Ministry delegations would remain unchanged.
- ▶ **“IN SUPPORT OF IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES.”**
Submitted by Southern California — Nevada Conference.
Calls for UCC bodies to support immigration reform and calls upon the U.S. government to end further militarization of borders.
- ▶ **“LEGALIZATION OF PHYSICIAN AID IN DYING.”**
Submitted by Northern California — Nevada Conference.
Calls for greater advocacy by church bodies for legalized physician aid in dying.
- ▶ **“REAFFIRMING OUR FAITH TO RETAIN OUR CHURCHES.”**
Submitted by Corinth Reformed UCC in Hickory, N.C., and 25 other churches affiliated with the Faithful and Welcoming Movement.
Calls upon Synod to “address the concerns of congregations that may be considering withdrawing from the UCC by reaffirming our classical and centrist theological heritage.” Calls for an “extravagant welcome” to members and churches with an “evangelical, conservative, orthodox or traditional” theological outlook.
- ▶ **“REGARDING THE TAR CREEK SUPERFUND SITE.”**
Submitted by the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference.
Calls for Synod to urge swifter government action on Tar Creek mining cleanup in Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri, ranked 22 years ago by the Environmental Protection Agency as the first and worst toxic site in the United States. River, soil and air contamination have negatively affected American Indian communities throughout the region.
- ▶ **“RENEWING THE COVENANT WITH THE RURAL CHURCH.”**
Submitted by Northern Plains Conference.
Calls for greater denominational support and resourcing for rural, small-member churches.
- ▶ **“RETURNING TO UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE UCC.”**
Submitted by Penn Central Conference.
Urges dissenting churches not to leave the UCC and calls for “an end to rhetoric that fuels hostility or misunderstanding” by churches that may disagree with Conference or General Synod resolutions.

Full texts of proposed resolutions online at <ucc.org/synod>.



Faithfully illiterate: What we don't know about religion hurts us all

By Nancy Haught
Religion News Service

What Americans don't know about religion is sometimes funny. For instance, when Jay Leno interviewed people on the street recently, someone told him that God made Eve out of an apple.

Our ignorance also makes for some astonishing statistics. Ten percent of us believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Seventy-five percent of us are certain that the Bible says, "God helps those who help themselves." Even evangelical Christians have lapses: 20 percent say they believe in reincarnation.

It should not be surprising, then, that most Americans don't know the difference between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Most of us haven't read any Hindu Scripture, and we couldn't find the Buddha's Eight-fold Path with a map.

In his new book, "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn't," Stephen Prothero, head of the religion department at Boston University, points out what Americans don't know and how it can hurt us. His book includes a religious literacy quiz that he says most of his beginning students fail at the start of an introductory course.

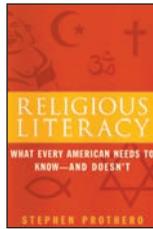
Because we are ignorant of the Bible, of our own faith (whatever

religion we might practice) and of others' religious traditions, we stand to suffer politically, culturally and personally, Prothero says.

We can't decode political speeches, we can't weigh religious arguments, we can't explain to our own kids why we disagree with others on a religious point, he explains in a telephone interview. We're even confused about our own beginnings.

"Ever since George Washington put his hand on a Bible and swore to uphold a godless Constitution, the United States has been both staunchly secular and resolutely religious," Prothero writes in "Religious Literacy."

The problem, Prothero argues,



RELIGIOUS LITERACY:
WHAT EVERY AMERICAN NEEDS TO KNOW
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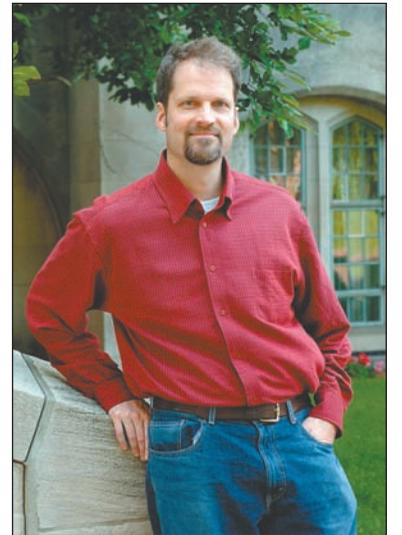
is an unfounded wariness of teaching religion as a secular subject. Only 8 percent of public high school students report that their school offers a class on the Bible.

"There are two ways to talk about religion," Prothero says. "The way we're most accustomed to is a Sunday or Sabbath school way, as a matter of personal faith. But religions are institutions, with histories and books that outsiders can read and ethical codes that outsiders can learn. There is as much knowledge to be gained about religion as there is about music, art and history."

Like it or not, religion has shaped and still is shaping American history, culture, politics and foreign policy, Prothero says.

Americans who are ignorant about religion are vulnerable to being bullied by politicians and by those in the news media who give too much coverage to the crazy arguments."

— Stephen Prothero, author



gently about religion.

The diversity of religious expression in the United States is challenging, he says, but it is no excuse for nursing our ignorance.

"Our public debate about religion-inflected matters is dominated by people on the far left and the far right, who either think religion should be run out of politics or rammed down our throats," he says. "This leads to a kind of public discussion that is more heat than light."

What's a country to do? Prothero

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calls for public school classes that teach about religion and sacred texts by trained teachers who know their Constitutional responsibilities. In the meantime, he's compiled a dictionary of religious words, people, stories and symbols that fills 78 pages of his book.

If nothing else, he says, spend an afternoon reading two books of the Bible, Genesis and Matthew.

"If you read those two books, you get about 80 percent of the characters, phrases and stories that are used in American politics," he says. "It's a start."

And then, unlike a chunk of the American public, you'll know that Abraham Lincoln didn't deliver the Sermon on the Mount and that Sodom and Gomorrah were never married.

Nancy Haught writes for *The Oregonian* in Portland, Ore.

A RELIGIOUS LITERACY QUIZ: How much 'God stuff' do you really know?

Test your knowledge with this quiz from Stephen Prothero's book, "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn't."

1. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
2. Name a sacred text of Hinduism.
3. What is the name of a holy book of Islam?
4. Where according to the Bible was Jesus born?
5. President George W. Bush spoke in his first inaugural address of the Jericho road. What Bible story was he invoking?
6. What are the first five book of the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament?
7. What is the Golden Rule?
8. "God helps those who help themselves." Is this in the Bible? If so, where?
9. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Does this appear in the Bible? If so, where?
10. Name the "Ten Commandments." List as many as you can.
11. Name the four noble truths of Buddhism.

12. What are the seven sacraments of Catholicism? List as many as you can.
13. The First Amendment says two things about religion, each in its own "clause." What are these two clauses?
14. What is Ramadan? In what religion is it celebrated?
15. Match the Bible characters with the stories in which they appear. Draw a line from one to the other. (Hint: some may be matched with more than one story, or vice versa).

Adam and Eve	Exodus
Paul	Binding of Isaac
Moses	Olive Branch
Noah	Garden of Eden
Jesus	Parting of the Red Sea
Abraham	Road to Damascus
Serpent	Garden of Gethsemane

ANSWERS AND SCORING:

1. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. (one point each)
2. Many possibilities, including the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Yoga Sutras, Laws of Manu, and the Kama Sutra. (one point)
3. Quran. (one point)
4. Bethlehem. (one point)
5. The Good Samaritan. (one point)
6. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. (one point each)
7. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (Matt. 7:12) or a similar sentiment by Rabbi Hillel or Confucius. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is not the Golden Rule. (one point)

8. No, Benjamin Franklin said it. In fact, it is contradicted in Proverbs: "He who trusts in himself is a fool." (one point)
9. Yes, in Matt. 5:3, the Beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. (one point)
10. The Protestant, Catholic and Jewish versions differ in terms of grouping/ordering. Give yourself credit for any 10 of the following 12: I am the Lord your God. Have no other gods before me. Do not make yourself a graven image. Do not take the Lord's name in vain. Remember Sabbath and keep it holy. Honor father and mother. Do not kill/murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet your neighbor's wife. Do not covet your neighbor's goods. (one point each, maximum of 10)
11. Life is suffering. Suffering has an origin. Suffering can be overcome (nirvana). The path to overcoming suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. (one point each)
12. Baptism, Eucharist/Mass/Holy Communion, Reconciliation/Confession/Penance,

- Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders / Ordination, Anointing of the Sick / Last Rites. (one point each)
 13. Establishment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, ..." Free exercise clause: "... or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." (one point each)
 14. Ramadan is a Muslim holiday characterized by a month of fasting. (two points)
 15. Adam and Eve = Garden of Eden, Paul = Road to Damascus, Moses = Exodus and Parting of the Red Sea, Noah = Olive Branch, Jesus = Road to Damascus and Garden of Gethsemane, Abraham = Binding of Isaac, Serpent = Garden of Eden. (one point each)
- Check yourself: A grade of A is 90-100 points. B is 80-89. C is 70-79. A passing grade is 60 points or more.

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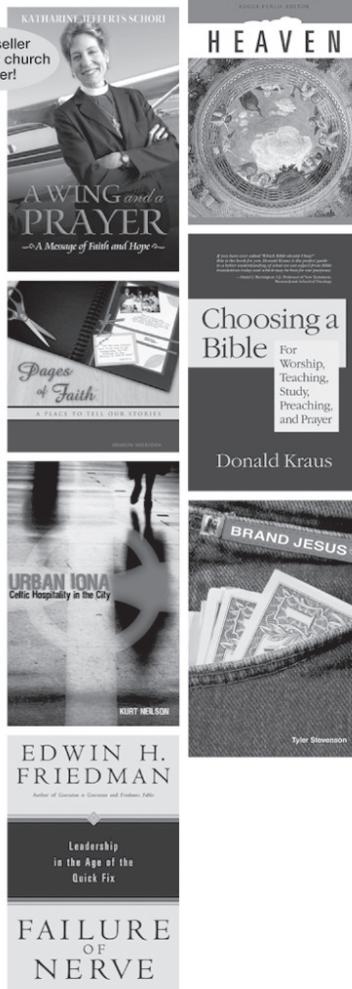
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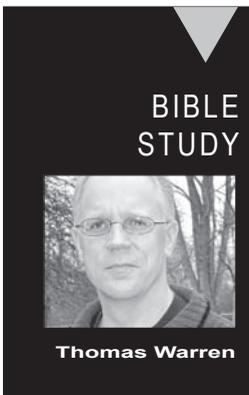
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UCC@50: Our faithful are still defending Naboth's vineyard



Thomas Warren

The Rev. Thomas I. Warren is pastor of Pleasant Hill Community UCC in Tennessee. Throughout 2007, his bible study will appear each issue on the spirituality page.

On June 17 — the Third Sunday after Pentecost — many UCC members will be getting ready to depart for General Synod 26 in Hartford, Conn. Indeed, many will have already arrived in preparation for this tremendous undertaking.

General Synod 26 is going to be a great celebration of our denomination and its witness to Christ throughout the past five decades.

While the UCC is a joyously complex and multi-dimensional body of Christ, perhaps we are best known for the courageous positions we have taken on issues of social justice. While many of these positions are well known and celebrated — at least within our UCC family — our lectionary reading for the third week after Pentecost gives us an opportunity to reflect on our justice witness.

1 Kings 21 is the story of Naboth's vineyard. It is set during the reign of King Ahab, who ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel from 869-850 B.C.E. This is a tale not simply of land confiscation by the powerful, but of the decisive clash between two systems and where the God of Israel is situated in this struggle.

The first 16 verses describe the conflict. Ahab, the king, wants the vineyard of Naboth, the peasant. It will make a fine garden plot. Land exchange or simple monetary recompense is offered to no avail. The land is a family inheritance that will not be so easily released. The king is depressed and returns home from the vineyard resentful (vs. 5). But Ahab's wife, Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, knows about royal power and demands that her husband utilize his position and simply take the land. It is, after all, what real kings do! So a plan is hatched.

Jezebel's strategy is to frame Naboth through a seemingly gentle and somewhat covert letter-writing campaign. In Ahab's name, these letters will accuse Naboth as unfaithful both to God and king, a charge meriting execution. Once dead, the land under dispute will be given over to the crown (21:8-14). This scheme, which creates a classic — and yet very contemporary — situation of plausible deniability, works as planned by the queen. Ahab receives the land initially denied to him by ancestral notions of family inheritance. The parcel is now possessed as "royal property" to which the crown has unquestioned claim.

But Jezebel underestimates the God whom her husband is supposed to serve. Calling upon the prophet Elijah, Yahweh announces that Ahab will reap what he has sown. The charge and consequences are straightforward and harsh (21:20): "Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster on you..." Neither will Jezebel escape God's wrath (21:23); indeed, like previous kings Jeroboam and Baasha, the destruction of one peasant will bring forth the complete destruction of Ahab's dynasty. And while Ahab shows signs of royal repentance (21:29), in the end the judgment remains.

The story of Naboth's vineyard is not simply an isolated tale of royal land-grabbers exploiting a powerless peasant. It is the universal struggle of the socially, politically and economically marginalized, lived out repeatedly in every nation of every age. God comes to defend the rights of the powerless, for they are the favored children of the Most High.

In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, this is the primary struggle. The powerful forces of history — be it Pharaoh's Egypt, Ahab's Israel, Caesar's Rome, or the *Pax Americana* of the 21st century —



ROADWORK

- ▶ Where do we see the struggle for Naboth's vineyard being played out today?
- ▶ In what ways are we as individuals and as churches aligned with the longing of Ahab and the scheming of Jezebel?
- ▶ The judgment on Ahab's dynasty is harsh. Do we see God's judgment being played out today in our world? In what tangible ways can we repent as individuals, churches, and a nation for our confiscation of others peoples' inheritance?

gain their wealth and dominion at the expense of those least able to defend themselves.

As followers of Christ, we are called to be defenders. In this very moment in history, perhaps more than ever, the royal powers of the day are once again after Naboth's land. Today the struggle for justice is being waged on all fronts. As always, the struggle is dangerous and made even more so by its now-global scope.

Moses led the Israelites to liberation from Egypt. Jesus conquered the state-sponsored death sentence of Rome. For the past 50 years, the UCC has lived out its faith as best we know how: fighting for the cause of social justice and human dignity.

As we celebrate our golden anniversary, let us give thanks to God for the steadfast love which surrounds us, for the life and teachings of Christ which guide us and for the power of the Holy Spirit which sustains us.

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FILIPINO CHURCHES CRY: HELP STOP THE MURDERS!

'Extrajudicial' killings of human rights workers escalate in Philippines

By W. Evan Golder

Ever since Gloria Macapagal Arroyo became president of the Philippines in 2001, at least 835 human rights workers have been murdered in that country. In those six years, the pace of the killings has accelerated, with 207 occurring in 2006 alone.

The killings are being called "extrajudicial," that is, punishment without the permission of a court or legal authority. Nevertheless, separate inquiries by Amnesty International, the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), the United Nations and the Philippines government itself have noted the systematic nature of the killings and connected them with government security forces.

According to the Amnesty report, titled "Philippines: Political Killings, Human Rights and the Peace Process," practically all of the victims, both men and women, have been community organizers, church workers, pastors and priests, human rights activists, trade union and peasant leaders, journalists, indigenous peoples activists, elected local officials and political activists.

The murders have taken place throughout the country. In nearly all cases, the modus operandi was the same: victims shot by unidentified men, often wearing ski masks, and riding motorcycles.

For example:

- The Rev. Edison Lapuz, 38, was killed on May 12, 2005, while he and his wife were resting at her father's house after attending the funeral of his wife's father. Two unidentified gunmen reportedly entered the house and shot Lapuz point blank in the head and stomach. Lapuz was a minister of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines, and active in defending the rights and livelihoods of marginalized communities, including peasants and fisher folk.

- Attorney Abel Ladera, 45, was shot dead by an unidentified assailant armed with a rifle on March 4, 2005. He was on his way home and had stopped at an auto supply store, when he was killed instantly by a single bullet piercing his heart. Ladera had represented the interests of sugar mill workers and farmers involved in strike negotiations at nearby sugar plantations.

- Father William Tadena, 37, a parish priest, was ambushed on March 13, 2005, while traveling in his jeep to celebrate his second mass of the morning. As he slowed his vehicle in response to someone who called out "Father" and waved at him, two men approached on a motorcycle. One of them fired gunshots into his back, neck and head. He later died in a hospital. Tadena was chairman of the Human Rights and Social Concerns Committee of

the Diocese of Tarlac.

- Irma "Kathy" Alcantara, 44, was shot and killed on Dec. 5, 2005, while she was participating in province-wide farmers and fisher folk conference. She had just left the hotel when two armed men on motorcycles opened fire. A veteran community organizer, she campaigned successfully in the 1980s against the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant. More recently, she had helped organize a number of demonstrations.

Rooted in Marcos years

The roots of the violence go back to the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos (1972-1986), when attacks on the church were commonplace.

As the saying goes, "Politics make strange bedfellows," says the Rev. José "Joe" Malayang. Ordained in the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), Malayang served the largest church on the island of Mindanao before moving to the United States. Today he is executive minister of the UCC's Local Church Ministries and a member of the UCC's five-member Collegium of Officers.

During the Marcos dictatorship, Malayang explains, communists, priests and pastors worked together



President Gloria Arroyo addresses a crowd in Manila during the April 2007 political convention of Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats.

Jay Director | AFP/Getty Images

in the anti-Marcos movement. Along with human rights advocates and students, they eventually ousted him in 1986. After that, these groups continued to press for more human rights.

But also, during the Marcos years, the army established para-military groups. Today, Malayang says, the mayors and warlords still have their own armed people, be they army or police. And even though the Communist Party is now legal and can run candidates for office, if people publicly call pastors and human rights advocates "communists" and "leftists," he says, "that's a license to eliminate them."

"My sense is," Malayang says, "that the warlords have their private armies around them. They want to protect their illegal activities and they don't want to give up their power. So when they hear that this pastor or that priest speaks in support of the

WHEN THE WARLORDS hear that this pastor or that priest speaks in support of the rights of the poor or speaks against corruption, sooner or later they get eliminated."

— The Rev. José A. Malayang,
Filipino native and UCC leader



rights of the poor or speaks against corruption, sooner or later they get eliminated."

Arroyo administration accused

According to the 90-page NCCP report, "Let the Stones Cry Out," aside from those representing the church and faith communities, "the victims have come from all walks of life and include human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists ..."

"These incidents ... have grown in alarming proportions under President Gloria M. Arroyo," the NCCP report says, "especially because they show a pattern that such cases are taking place in the context of the government's counter-insurgency program and the 'war against terrorism.'"

As vice-president, Arroyo, the daughter of a former Philippines president, assumed the presidency on January 20, 2001, when the incumbent was forced from power amid accusations of corruption. Re-elected in a controversial contest in 2004, results from her most-recent reelection effort on May 14, 2007, were inconclusive at press time, due to widespread violence and fraud allegations.

Five months after she first became president, a Methodist minister, the Rev. Marcelino de la Cruz of central Luzon, was shot to death on May 28, 2001, thus becoming the first victim of the current spate of slayings.

Despite the common features of the attacks, the similar profiles of the victims and the very few prosecutions, the government continues to deny any involvement. It insists there is no state policy authorizing extrajudicial executions, there are no secret "death squads," and the armed forces do not use hired killers.

Military officials also claim that the activists have links to rural Communist rebels, who have fought for independence for nearly four decades.



A protester in Manila holds a placard and picture of Philippines President Gloria Arroyo as she condemns the government for condoning a spate of extrajudicial killings. Recent reports by a U.N. special envoy and the government's own commission on inquiry have implicated the military in the killing of leftists and other government critics.

Jay Director | AFP/Getty Images

As concern over the killings spread globally, Arroyo's presidential spokesman told the press that she condemns the killings and "is avowed to face this issue in the domestic and international arena with full transparency and resolve to uphold the law."

In 2006, Arroyo appointed a governmental fact-finding commission to investigate the killings. Also, the United Nations sent an expert to write its own report. Although both reports named a retired Philippine Army general as a "prime suspect behind the extrajudicial killings," Arroyo continues to deny this.

Global church support

"When we look into the faces of human beings, we see the image of God," says the Rev. Sharon E. Watkins, general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). "So when human rights are violated anywhere, God is offended."

Through their predecessor bodies, the UCC and the Disciples have enjoyed "partnerships" and friendships with the UCCP for more than a century.

"So human rights violations and senseless killings there strike us close to the heart," Watkins says. "We continue to call on the Arroyo administration to do all possible to put an end to the human rights violations and killings."

To that end, the UCC's Michigan Conference is planning to submit a resolution to its Annual Meeting in June. Its purpose is three-fold, says the Rev. Roger Pohl, who has visited the Philippines many times.

"It lifts up the targeting and killing in the Philippines," he says. "It calls on the Conference and our churches to express our concern to our elected officials, and to contact the Philippines consulates here in the United States."

"The Philippines is the largest

recipient in Asia of military aid from the U.S.," Pohl says, "and U.S. law expects that military aid will not be used to abuse human rights. But, under the rubric of the so-called War on Terror, it's being used as a justification for the right wing, backed by the military, basically to suppress human rights workers."

In March, two church-led Filipino delegations visited Canada and the United States, respectively. Their message was simple: Help stop the killings.

In Washington, they spoke at Ecumenical Advocacy Days and before a Senate sub-committee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Afterward, they flew to Geneva, Switzerland, to submit their report to the U.N. Human Rights Council and to The Hague, The Netherlands, for the Permanent People's Second Session on the Philippines.

On Capitol Hill, they called for the United States to link military and development aid to the Philippines to the Arroyo administration's record on human rights.

The Rev. John H. Thomas, UCC general minister and president, also urges U.S. government intervention.

"For months, UCC leaders have been calling on the government of the Philippines to vigorously investigate and prosecute the killers and those who support them," he says. "We are outraged at the indifferent response to these pleas, and hope our own government can exert pressure."

"Meanwhile," he adds, "we pray for the families and congregations of those who have been killed among our partner church."

The Rev. W. Evan Golder is editor emeritus of United Church News.

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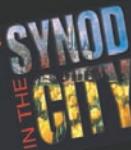
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\$1.5 MILLION FUNDRAISING EFFORT UNDERWAY

New retreat center nearing completion at historic 'Franklinton Center at Bricks'

By J. Bennett Guess

For decades in the rural South, the "Franklinton Center at Bricks" in Whitakers, N.C., was one of the few places where black and white people could meet and eat together.

Now, as a UCC-related conference, retreat and educational facility in eastern North Carolina — about 70 miles northeast of Raleigh — the former-plantation campus is raising funds to strengthen its justice-oriented programming.

The Fund for Franklinton Center is building a \$1.5-million retreat facility to enhance the Center's capacity for hospitality and programming to regional and national groups. The new facility, with 22 sleeping rooms, is expected to be completed by July on the Center's 200-acre campus. It will compliment an existing 70-room dormitory, but with more conveniences.

"This is a new modern facility that has handicap-accessible, motel-type rooms, with double beds, private baths, internet service and phones in

each room," says the Rev. Ervin Milton, director of the Franklin Center. "It will have the kind of modern conveniences that many people want and need at a retreat center."

On the contrary, the older facility is not handicap accessible and guests must use community showers.

"The present dormitory will sleep 70 comfortably, but you have to go down the hall to the bathroom," Milton explains. "For many people, it's comfortable. But for many people, it's not comfortable. This became a real issue and a real need."

In addition, a new, comfortable fellowship hall is part of the construction.

"It will further enhance the draw," Milton says. "It will attract new and larger groups in the future."

'A great opportunity'

The Franklinton Center traces its beginnings to the founding of the Franklinton Christian College, started by the James O'Kelly Christian Church in 1871 to train black leaders for local churches. Similarly, Julia

Bricks established the Bricks Junior College in 1895 through a gift of land and endowment to the American Missionary Association (AMA). The two educational facilities merged in 1954.

Located within the bounds of the UCC's Southern Conference, the Franklinton Center at Bricks is managed and staffed by the AMA's successor body, Justice and Witness Ministries, one of the UCC's four national Covenanted Ministries.

The Fund for Franklinton Center was launched about a year ago, with seed gifts of \$150,000 from JWM and \$100,000 from the UCC's Local Church Ministries. The largest individual donor wishes to keep the gift anonymous, but has provided generously from the proceeds of a house sale, Milton says.

To date, about \$500,000 has been raised, but early construction was given a go-ahead early this year, thanks to a \$1 million loan from the UCC's Cornerstone Fund. Future contributions to the Franklinton Center Fund will help retire that debt.

Gordon Gilles, who manages the Cleveland-based Cornerstone Fund, says the project was a perfect fit for Cornerstone's primary mission, which is to provide dollars for church-related building projects, especially when alternative forms of financing may prove difficult.

"Too often, our churches and related entities don't have access to traditional financing from other entities," Gilles says. "When you go to the [Franklinton Center] campus and realize how much more they can do



(Above) On Feb. 1, Franklinton Center's board and staff gather in front of the retreat center under construction. At left, the nearly-completed facility will be dedicated in August.

Ervin Milton photos

with expanded facilities, it is just amazing. It's a real salute to Justice and Witness Ministries and to the leadership of Franklinton Center. And it's a great opportunity for the entire denomination."

The Rev. Linda Jaramillo, JWM's executive minister, says Franklinton Center has been a "source of courage, education and spiritual comfort for decades" for those working the front lines for racial justice.

"That's why it's imperative that Franklinton Center's place in history not be forgotten and that its future within and beyond the UCC be strengthened," she says.

Buy-a-brick for 'Bricks'

"Franklinton Center Day" is still observed each year during the first week of August when hundreds of members of the UCC's Eastern North Carolina Association gather to honor the institution's racial and economic justice legacy as a spiritual center during the Civil Rights Movement.

In preparation for this summer's observance on Aug. 4, the Fund for Franklinton Center is launching a second-phase of its fundraising campaign where individuals and churches can "purchase" an engraved brick for the Center with a contribution of at least \$200. The engraved bricks will comprise the sidewalk outside the new facility.

"We are planning to sell 500 bricks by Franklinton Center Day, which would translate into \$100,000," Milton says.

The Franklinton Center continues to play a significant role in the education and nurture of church leaders, justice advocates, young people, and community leaders. Fundamental concerns such as rural justice, community development, environmental racism, and workers' rights are woven into its programmatic focus.

Milton says, ironically, Franklinton Center survived for decades because it was uniquely integrated on racial lines. However, as more places became open to integrated gatherings, the Center's importance became less apparent.

"In the 60s, the Center almost died," Milton says. "Then, for several years, it was in a rebuilding mode. Now, it's becoming a multi-cultural space, a safe space where people are feeling spiritual renewal. And that's the thing that we want to build on."

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UNITED CHURCH NEWS WINS TOP NEWSPAPER PRIZE

United Church News, the UCC's national newspaper, was recognized by the interfaith Religion Communicators Council as the nation's best religion newspaper during presentation of the 2007 DeRose-Hinkhouse Memorial Awards.

The annual awards program, held April 26 in Louisville, Ky., honors the best in religion communications in print, video and electronic media.

United Church News has more than 185,000 subscribers nationwide, making it the largest U.S. denominational publication in terms of readership. Its staff includes the Rev. Robert Chase, publisher; the Rev. J. Bennett Guess, editor; Randy Varcho, art director; and Connie Larkman, advertising manager.

For the second year in a row, Guess

received first-place honors for best newspaper editorial for his June-July 2006 column, "Easy analysis never captures full story of church's challenge." Guess also received a second-place award of merit for best newspaper feature story for "The Invisible, Protestant Mary." (December 2006).

The UCC also received first-place awards for best annual report, "And the World Took Notice" and for best television script for the "Ejector Seat" TV commercial.

Second-place awards were given to the UCC's 50 anniversary commemorative book, "UCC @50," for best overall publication design (Robert Chase, publisher; W. Evan Golder and J. Martin Bailey, editors; Randy Varcho, art director; and Robyn Nordstrom, designer) and to the UCC's

"Troubled Waters" documentary for ABC-TV stations (Robert Chase, Jean Robinson and Wally Ryan Kuroiwa, executive producers; UCC member Lynn Redgrave, narrator).

Also, in April, Associated Church Press presented United Church News with several awards at its annual meeting in Chicago.

Guess won a first-place award of excellence for best feature story, "Would Jesus Do Standup?" (April/May 2006) and third-place honorable mention for best news story, "Amplifying the Mainline" (June/July 2006)

The Rev. Lillian Daniel, United Church News' spirituality columnist in 2006, received second-place honors for best columnist.

ACP, like RCC, also honored the UCC's 2005 Annual Report, "And the World Took Notice" as the year's best.

DISCIPLES PLAN MASSIVE 'CHALICE EXCHANGE' AT SUMMER'S GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Those attending this summer's General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will be packing something extra in their suitcase: a chalice.

And those Disciples who can't attend the July 21-25 meeting in Fort Worth, Texas, are shipping a chalice to stand in their stead.

The coalescing of communion ware is more than symbolic for the Protestant denomination known for sharing communion at every service of worship. It's also intended to be a great sign of Christian unity, with

Disciples of Christ members and pastors leaving their national gathering with a different chalice than the one they brought.

"Every Disciples congregation is invited to bring or send a chalice to General Assembly 2007, which will be exchanged with a chalice from another Disciples congregation," reads the invitation to participate. "We will use as many chalices as possible in a communion service during evening worship, and the chalices will also be displayed in the chapel."

Disciples, who are known for their

bright red 'chalice' emblem, share a close ecumenical partnership with the UCC. Both denominations maintain a common Global Ministries board, based in Cleveland, Ohio and Indianapolis, Ind.

The UCC and Disciples also held joint General Synod/Assembly gatherings in 1993 and 2001. Last summer, the UCC's executive council said it would extend an invitation to the Disciples to consider meeting jointly once again in 2013.

Follow news of the General Assembly at <disciplesworld.com>.

DIED

The Rev. Francis Xavier Pirazzini, 84, who died May 6, was a UCC minister for 50 years and served as Conference leadership in Central Atlantic, Minnesota, Ohio and Florida. He also served churches in Pennsylvania and New York. In Florida since 1988, he was a member of **Lakewood UCC in St. Petersburg**, where his daughter, the Rev. Kim Wells, is pastor. A memorial service will be held on June 9.

MEMORIALIZED

The Rev. Hartland Helmich, 81, who died January 28, served the UCC in both the former Office of Lay Life and Work and the Office for Higher Education. A former pastor of **First Reformed UCC in Lancaster, Pa.** for 10 years, he had earlier on the staff of the National Council of Churches, the Student Christian Movement, and as chaplain at the University of Pennsylvania. Helmich was listed among 50 of the most influential UCC members in "UCC@50," the denomination's commemorative anniversary book, for his leadership on lay member involvement. A memorial service was held March 31 in Lancaster, Pa.



Helmich

REMEMBERED

Margaret R. Blemker, the first female area executive to serve with the former United Church Board for World Ministries, died in early February. She served as Middle East Executive for 34 years, from 1946-80. In retirement she lived at UCC-related Pilgrim Place in Claremont, Calif.

ELECTED

The Rev. Kent J. Siladi, who served for nearly 10 years as the Connecticut Conference's South Central Regional Minister, was elected Florida Conference Minister on March 17. "The discernment process ... has led to the clear conclusion that Kent is the person God intends to lead the Conference into the years ahead," wrote the Rev. Kim Wells, Conference moderator. "His experience in ministry, love of the United Church of Christ, and enthusiasm for the unique opportunities for ministry in Florida highly commend him for this call." Siladi begins his new ministry this month.

PASTORAL CHANGES

- Barton, Jeffrey D.** to UCC, Lake Oswego, OR
- Borden, Carleton** to Cong. UCC, Valley City, N.D.
- Cribbs, Arthur L.** San Diego, CA to Cong. UCC, San Marino, CA
- Detterman, Susan** to St. Mark UCC, Valrico, FL
- Geary, Jennifer T.** to interim, United UCC, Irasburg, VT
- Granger, Carol A.** Pittsfield, ME to United UCC, Clinton, MA
- Halvorsen, Ronald E.** to First Cong. UCC, Old Greenwich, CT
- Heckman, Randy A.** Cape Girardeau, MO to Union Cong. UCC, Moline, IL
- Kent, Laura L.** to interim, Cong. UCC, North Pomfret, VT
- Lumsden, James E.** Tucson, AZ to First UCC, Pittsfield, MA
- Lutz, Brad** to Union Cong. UCC, West Palm Beach, FL
- Martin, Leslie E.** to Federated Church, Livingston, N.J.
- Martin, Wayne** to interim, Cong. UCC, Lincoln City, OR
- McCusker, Jean** to Cong. UCC, Ellington, CT
- Miller, Karla J.** Medford, MA to Eliot UCC, Newton, MA
- Miner, Curtis** Clarion, IA to Cong. UCC, San Luis Obispo, CA
- Moore, Bonnie L.** Chalfont, PA to Shenkel UCC, Pottstown, PA
- Mulford, William R.** to interim, Chapel on the Hill UCC, Seminole, FL
- Niederfrank, Donald** Erin, WI to St. John's UCC, Random Lake, WI
- Pilletere, Mark D.** Taftville, CT to Mill Plain Union, Waterbury, CT
- Reynolds, Millie** to First Cong. UCC, Royalton, VT
- Shupe, Paul C.** Famlouth, ME to Lake Edge, Madison, WI
- Sichta, Robert D.** to Cong. UCC, Barneveld, WI
- Smith, Dan J.,** Centre Hall, PA to Zion Evangelical UCC, St. Joseph, MI
- Strever, Wayne A.** Southwick, MA to Second Cong. UCC, Stafford Springs, CT
- White, Derek L.** to Central Cong., Providence, R.I.
- Williams, Jackson L.** Berwick, ME to United Parish, Winchendon, MA

Information on pastoral changes provided by the UCC's Parish Life and Leadership Ministry.

CLERGY DEATHS

- Balfe, Robert S.,** 84, 4/5/2007
- Barth, Thomas E.,** 62, 3/22/2007
- Bartholomew, Carroll E.,** 72, 3/10/2007
- Beining, Elmer W.,** 81, 3/10/2007
- Chapman, May R.,** 70, 4/20/2007
- Davis, John P.,** 61, 3/17/2007
- Fisher, Ernest B.,** 93, 2/14/2007
- Frankenfeld, Paul H.,** 85, 3/16/2007
- Getz, Pierce A.,** 77, 3/30/2007
- Harding, Robert J.,** 85, 3/20/2007
- Heverly, Harris, E.,** 93, 3/17/2007
- Higuchi, Shinpei,** 83, 3/10/2007
- Jones, Donald A.,** 78, 3/4/2007
- Keeler, William O.,** 90, 4/3/2007
- Keeney, William F.,** 88, 3/9/2007
- Klasing, Raymond W.F.,** 77, 4/11/2007
- Kuppinger, Edmund,** 97, 3/31/2007
- Lehman, Donald F.,** 78, 3/17/2007
- Mentzer, Junior C.,** 81, 4/18/2007
- Missirlan, Harry M.,** 94, 4/11/2007
- Newell, Gordon,** 89, 3/14/2007
- Norman, James C.,** 69, 3/25/2007
- Priem, Roy I.,** 76, 1/15/2007
- Roberts, Arthur W.,** 77, 4/18/2007
- Ronander, Albert C.,** 92, 3/16/2007
- Schiltz, Karl F.,** 60, 3/26/2007
- Schumacher, Frederick T.,** 84, 3/14/2007
- Skeirik, Albert J.,** 88, 3/7/2007
- Slotten, Ralph,** 80, 2/12/2007
- Terpstra, Chester,** 89, 4/12/2007
- Trimble, James C.,** 86, 3/2/2007
- Wright, William C.,** 81, 3/14/2007
- Zinn, J. Robert,** 78, 3/11/2007

Information on clergy deaths is provided by the UCC's Pension Boards.

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12-Month Term Note	\$1,000	5.000%	5.062%
18-Month Term Note	\$1,000	5.000%	5.062%
30-Month Term Note	\$1,000	5.062%	5.126%
60-Month Term Note	\$1,000	5.125%	5.191%



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local church mission and ministry

Written by Carol L. Pavlik

MILITARY CHAPLAINCY

'To comfort the wounded and bereaved is a tremendous privilege'



The Rev. John Gundlach, a retired Navy Chaplain of 27 years, now serves as the UCC's minister for government chaplaincy. He ministers to the many men and women who are serving the U.S. military as chaplains and their spouses.

"The challenges to our chaplains and their families today are many," he says. "We have had quite a few of our chaplains serve in Iraq — Air Force, Army and Navy chaplains, active duty, reserve and National Guard. They have to be away from their families during deployments for a year to 15 months at a time. This is hard on marriages and families,

and requires a period of readjustment even for the strongest relationships."

Gundlach adds that many chaplains who have served in Iraq have returned with symptoms of post traumatic stress. That's why he especially wants to thank UCC clergy who serve as chaplains in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

"They minister in a myriad of ways to our returning veterans," he says. "They care for those who have been wounded by the horrors of war — those with physical wounds like traumatic brain injuries and amputations, with those who are mentally and spiritually bereft, and those suffering from [post traumatic stress] and a variety of addictions."

"In spite of the cost, there are joys in this

ministry," says Gundlach. "Being in there with others in some of the most extreme circumstances any person can endure, and helping to remind them of their humanity as well

It's a mantle that few clergy are willing or able to take up, but for our clergy who are called to be military chaplains, it is truly a high calling."

— The Rev. John Gundlach, UCC's minister for government chaplaincy

as the humanity of the enemy, being there to offer the assurance of God's grace, to comfort the wounded and the bereaved, is a tremendous privilege. It's a mantle that few clergy are willing or able to take up, but for our clergy who are called to be military chaplains, it is truly a high calling."

LETTERS FROM OUR UCC MILITARY CHAPLAINS:

Editor's note: In a two-part series called 'Letters from chaplains,' United Church News has compiled reflections on their ministries from several UCC clergy who serve as military chaplains — at U.S. military bases and hospitals, as well as on foreign deployment. More 'letters from chaplains' will appear in our July-August issue.

▶ The Rev. Rob Heckathorne, a local parish minister and son of a retired-reservist, didn't enter the Navy as a chaplain until July 2001, "at the ripe age of 46." Before that, he served local parishes in both Presbyterian and UCC churches, while volunteering with the Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary to the U.S. Air Force. Currently, he is the only UCC chaplain serving on active duty with the United States Coast Guard.

I STRONGLY BELIEVE that God places his faithful where Christ's ministry can be realized. Though significantly older than the sailors whom I have counseled and loved (in most cases twice their age), my life experiences, my longevity in the parish, being a parent of similarly aged children, has proved to help me provide more effective ministry.

Ministry among the Coast Guard is unique to the other services in many regards. The Coast Guard's role is a multi-tasked maritime service with eclectic responsibilities from safeguarding fish hatcheries and environmental protection, to providing port security, to lifesaving missions. The diversity of its mission can change each day. During my tour I have had the blessing and opportunity to help in responding to a devastating tsunami and four major hurricanes. In each of these I have witnessed the exceptional integration of our military services with our civilian communities. And similarly have witnessed the collegiality of chaplains from diverse traditions melding seamlessly in an effort to meet the ministry needs of the service personnel and often the civilian communities.

I often wrestle with the concept of how and where can I meet a particular person where he or she might be in their journey of who God is to him or her. At the same time I realize that for many young people with whom I connect, I am of the very first Minister of the Word and Sacrament that they have ever met. That is a great responsibility and opportunity.

▶ The Rev. David C. Nutt, a chaplain in the Connecticut Army National Guard since 1999 and its full-time state support chaplain since August 2005, was called into active duty out of Waterbury, Conn., in June 2006. Nutt is moved by the support from the UCC's Local Church Ministries and local UCC churches.

THE HIGH POINTS [of this ministry] come when a soldier 'gets it' that he or she can actually rely on Jesus Christ to help carry their burden when it gets to heavy. I know that sounds trite, but it is true.

I wish the media, in all its hype, would do a better job in explaining that there is a huge difference between the three R's (reunion, readjustment, and reentry) and post traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, what part about that it being forever don't they understand? You might not even experience it until you hit a trigger years later. And the 'cure' is learning how to deal with it, how to turn off the bad movies in your head. It's like grief. It's not cured — you just get better at dealing with it and it doesn't hurt as much.

All of this has not caused me to wrestle with my faith at all, but pushed me to rely on God more and more. Too often as pastors we are prone to dip into hyper intellectual Jesus psycho-babble when all we have to do is merely arrange the meeting between Christ and his estranged children.

▶ The Rev. B.J. Myers-Bradley works at the Louis Stokes Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Brecksville, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. He specializes in substance abuse, gambling addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder. He has served churches in the UCC's Florida and Indiana-Kentucky Conferences.

BEING AN INSTRUMENT in the healing of past scars is a joy. Many veterans come into the VA seeking to become whole. The consequences of war, abandonment by family and friends, and the disappointment of failed expectations have resulted in self-de-

struction. God is viewed as either part of the abandonment, or clung to so closely that the veteran alienates him/herself from others. Joy comes from experiencing the transformation of a veteran forgiving the past, and expanding a concept of spirituality that does not push others away. Empowering healing by presenting an accepting and forgiving God that is larger than past stereotypes and viewing transformed lives because of the interplay between spirituality and counseling fulfills me.

I understand my role as chaplain as not providing explanations, but to empower questions and hope. Chaplain Mahedy, a retired VA chaplain, addressed the hope intrinsic within the dark night of the soul when he states: 'Easter occurred at night, not during the day.'

▶ The Rev. Daniel M. Parker, is a chaplain colonel with the U.S. Army at the Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri) Installation.

I'M THE KIND OF PERSON who likes to get out and about — where the troops are, because I want to be with them, hear their stories, listen to their concerns, laugh with them, pray with them, hold worship wherever they are and help them in their pilgrimage as the multitude of others have for me, especially my God.

The high point of working with these dedicated women and men, brings me to reevaluate my own faith commitment. I've never worked harder than in this assignment, but I've never in my wildest imagination worked as hard as these chaplain and chaplain assistant women and men are working. For most it is often a 14-hour work day. During the summer surge season (May - Sept.) each chaplain covers as many as 2,000 soldiers plus at least 100 cadre and staff. Surprisingly, they don't complain. But I see and hear their pain, their groans.

▶ The Rev. Anton (Tony) Ciomperlik is a chaplain assigned to the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. A reserve, he was activated and deployed to Iraq in 2003. A member of Woodland

UCC in Longview, Texas, he is currently on sabbatical from Good Shepherd Medical Center as director of pastoral care. He writes:

I SPENT A YEAR IN TIKRIT, IRAQ during 2003 and 2004 and ministered to over 700 soldiers who were experiencing combat. I worked very closely with a combat stress team to reduce the levels of trauma our soldiers were in. I believe that many of our soldiers were blessed and strengthened by our efforts.

My faith definition has changed since my return from Iraq. I define faith as believing in God for what I cannot provide for myself. Faith took me through many mortar attacks and fire fights that broke out in the middle of the night. I can remember one night in particular when an ambush took place in Tikrit. I slipped out of my bunk onto me knees and began to pray, knowing that my soldiers were on patrol that night and now they were in harm's way. The fight lasted for about an hour and the next day a couple of the soldiers came in and told me how they were ambushed and almost lost one of their soldiers. We talked about the power of prayer and God's protection for them and we prayed together.

Later that week, Matt, a military police officer came in to see me and I could tell he was very troubled. He teared up and told me he was outside at the front gate to our operating base directing traffic. During a time when a convoy was coming in, several Iraqi terrorist fired upon the convoy and one individual fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at Matt and his humvee. The rocket bounced off his humvee and hit a 10-year-old boy who was standing alongside the road across the street. The RPG did not explode but the blunt force trauma killed him anyway. Matt was devastated. He said to me that he was prepared to see grown men with guns die but not a small boy. I led Matt to Christ and baptized him a week later in the Tigris River.

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